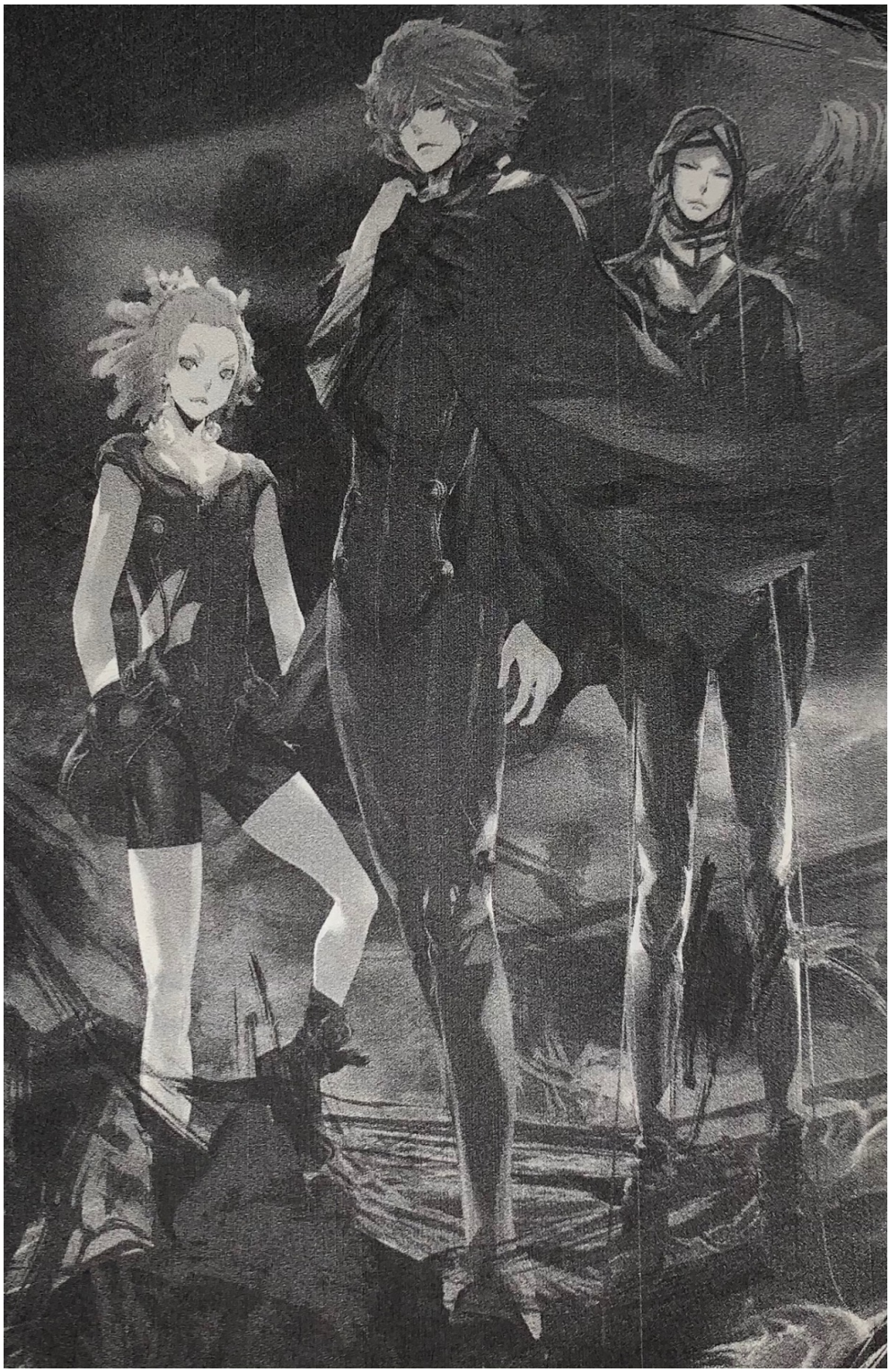
Yu Godai
QUANTUM DEVIL SAGA
AVATAR TUNER
Vol. 2
Translated by Kevin Frane



QDSAT vol 2 transcript

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The Territories of the Junkyard

Muladhara Held by the Embryon tribe, led by Serph.

Svadhisthana Held by the Embryon tribe, formerly under the control of the Vanguards.

Manipura Held by the Maribel tribe, led by Jinana, allied with the Embryon.

Anahata Held by the Embryon tribe, formerly under the control of the Solids.

Vishuddha Held by the Wolves tribe, led by Canis Volk.

Ajna Held by the Brutes tribe, led by Varin Omega.

Sahasrara The inviolate territory that holds the Temple, the headquarters of the Church of the Arbiters of Karma.

Part I

(continued)

The Junkyard

Chapter 6

Only from one side can there be any question here of illuminating the fact that sin is a position… A constituent of sin is the self as infinitely potentiated by the conception of God, and thus in turn it is the greatest possible consciousness of sin as a deed. This is the expression for the fact that sin is a position; the positive factor in it is precisely this, that it is before God.

-Kierkegaard, A Sickness Unto Death

"Church records confirm that this man is indeed a Newborn," Gale said to the others seated at the tactical planning table, his voice flat and mechanical. "The timestamp on his creation profile is twenty days ago, ten days after the manifestation of the Atma phenomenon and our defeat of the Vanguards."

The table's three-dimensional projector displayed the bust of the red-haired escapee from the Wolves, as well as a simple readout showing his combat capabilities and the name of his Atma. The man himself, known as Lupa, sat at the table beside the Embryon leaders, his shoulders drawn in and face screwed up in discomfort.

Lupa had appeared in Embryon territory with a group of individuals claiming to be fugitives from the Wolves. The rest of the group was now being kept in a holding facility. Although they had showed no sign of hostility, it was clear that something had them more than a little frightened, and the Embryon leaders wanted to get to the bottom of their story as soon as possible.

As the fugitives' leader and de facto representative, Lupa had been interrogated by both Gale, the Embryon's bishop, and Serph, the tribe's leader. The shock trooper Heat had invited himself into the proceedings, as well. Seeming to accept that he was, for the time being at least, a prisoner, Lupa now sat hunched in his chair both hands in plain view on the armrests. His sharp eyes peered out from beneath thick, bushy eyebrows, calmly and fastidiously taking stock of his situation. He met the penetrating stares directed his way with a resolute intensity of his own, looking both ready and willing to repay any physical mistreatment with the same in equal measure. Yet he remained calm and quiet, if not for his own sake, then for that of the fellow Wolves he had brought along with him.

Once again, Serph thought about the man called Lupa he had known before—his own former leader, who had looked exactly like this Lupa—and reminded himself that this man couldn't possibly be him. "His Atma is called Cerberus?" Serph asked. "I haven't heard of that one."

"I have conducted a search, and found no one else in possession of said Atma," Gale said. "Its combat capabilities suggest that it is on par with those of the ranking members of our tribe. It is very likely a type of High Atma; however, the other Newborns who accompanied him possess only Lesser Atma. For a Newborn, he is unusually powerful."

"You're certain you don't remember anything?" Serph asked the prisoner. "About us?"

"I'm sorry," Lupa replied with an apologetic shrug. "I don't remember anything before the moment they ushered us out through the Temple gates and into the Junkyard with the others. I was already in possession of things we did was to enter Wolves territory; after they took us into custody, we joined up with their tribe. But then it wasn't long be- fore we were forced to flee here."

He paused and turned his attention to Serph. "Why are you ask- ing me these questions? If you're suggesting that you and I have met before, I have no memory of it."

Heat growled under his breath as he stood leaning against the wall, and it was all Serph could do to keep himself from screaming in frustration. "You're *Lupa*," he insisted, his voice low and level. "You, Heat, and I used to be a tribe together, just the three of us."

Gale flashed him a concerned, questioning look, but Serph ignored it and pressed on. "You were our leader. Our first leader. You took Heat and me on as Newbies, and you hammered the fundamentals of combat and tactics into us."

"What?" Lupa looked beseechingly from Heat's fiery gaze to Serph's determined, silvery stare before shaking his head and sinking back into his chair. "That doesn't make any sense. I only remember as far back as leaving the Temple. I can say for sure I've never been the leader of a tribe, and I don't recall taking on any other members, either. What happened to this 'Lupa' you're talking about now?"

"He's dead," Heat grunted.

Serph gritted his teeth behind pursed lips. "He was killed in battle, shot dead by an enemy sniper. We managed to find the leader of the enemy tribe on the battlefield and take him out before the Church issued their cease-fire order. Once that order came, Lupa's tribe– *your* tribe, the Embryon-- was dissolved, since you'd been killed in action. But we reformed the tribe, with only a leader and a single follower, and kept its legacy alive. This was all a long time ago, though, before we had Atma."

The scenario that played out in his dreams came back to him with remarkable clarity. *A tank barreled in towards their position. He hurled a grenade. There was a spray of blood. The muzzle of a rifle poked out from within a bunker. A hand signal waved him. A broad-shouldered man hopped out of the trench ahead of him and began to charge-- then staggered, stricken. A scream of despair tore its way out of Serph's throat...*

"If this 'Lupa' of yours died so long ago, how could I be him? Do I look that much like him?"

"You more than just *look* like him," Heat spat.

Serph nodded in agreement. "Your face, your body, your voice-- even the way you move are all exactly the same. I'm willing to bet that your physical capabilities and your combat prowess are the same, too. Plus there's the fact that you have a High Atma. Thus far, only tribe leaders or high-ranking lieutenants have been in possession of those."

"But the fact remains that he is a Newborn. His production timestamp confirms it," Gale pointed out calmly. "When individuals in the Junkyard die, they ascend to the heavens and are taken in with the clouds; from there, they fall back to the earth as rain, which is collected by the Church and washed clean of its karma before being given life again in a the form of Newborns. There are no recorded instances of an individual's abilities or physical appearance being carried over from a previous incarnation. With the exception of bishops, all Newborns are created with roughly equivalent beginner-level capabilities. While personal judgment and other variances in ability begin to emerge later on, there are no reports of any Newborns inheriting the name and appearance of an individual who has already died, nor is there any record of a Newborn possessing capabilities on par with those of a tribe leader."

Gale pressed a series of keys. The data scrolling across the screen stopped, and one of the lines in the file of deceased combatants opened into a display window. Lupa gasped in surprise and shifted in his chair. Serph stiffened, and he could hear Heat nearby, swallowing a breath.

The screen showed a man with dull red hair, Lupa's spitting image, differing only in the color of the tribal markings on his cheeks-- and the accompanying data. Underneath the various numbers that recorded his personal measurements and combat experience, in red letters, was the word 'DECEASED.' The date was more than five years in the past.

"I just performed a search on Church casualty records," Gale said, looking up at the monitor as he finished typing. "This does indeed appear to be the same person. There is no appreciable difference in vital statistics. I cross-referenced the data with our own readings, and beyond the differences in attire and markings, the two are completely identical. There are no other records of a Newborn inheriting both the appearance and abilities of a deceased combatant to such a perfect degree."

"What does that mean?" Lupa said, flustered. "There was another me that already died? And I was reborn as a Newbie but with his body and abilities? Does that happen?"

"Until now, such a thing was not possible; however, since the manifestation of the Atma, we have seen a number of things occur that should not be possible. Perhaps the Church has made a change to the Newborn production system, or some type of bug has cropped up in it. I have placed an inquiry with the Church about this matter, but their response stated only that they do not acknowledge any abnormality pertaining to the Newborn in question-- that is to say, the current you. I am forced to surmise that the Church is either hiding something from us, or the Church itself lacks a full understanding of what is happening."

"Could this be another one of the changes the Church has made?" Serph asked.

"Unlikely. The fundamental purpose of creating Newborns is to bolster the fighting forces of the different tribes. The core tenet of the Junkyard is that only those who can learn and adapt are able to hone their abilities and survive, and from there come together to form tribes and strive for

dominance. To have Newborns with capabilities equivalent to a seasoned tribal leader would upset the very balance of competition itself. It is difficult to believe that the Church would intentionally allow such a thing. There is the possibility, however, that the being known as Angel manipulated the circumstances to such an end."

"I don't know. I don't think even Angel would go so far as to change the fundamental rules of the Junkyard," Serph said. "The Church may not have explained its reasoning for giving us our Atma, but the basic nature of what we're doing hasn't really changed."

The goal was still to fight, to kill, and to be victorious. But now the victors would literally consume the losers in order to grow even more powerful. Serph thought back on the words of the mysterious voice that called itself Angel.

"Atma is the power of demons, as well as your Asura forms. It is the vital force of your true selves. As you do battle and devour the flesh and blood of those you defeat, your power will grow stronger."

"The strong survive, and the weak are weeded out," Serph said. "That's how the average level of combat prowess in the Junkyard improves; the only thing that the presence of Atma has done is make the principle more clear. To release Newbies that already possess higher-level capabilities seems to run counter to the Church's goals. Their aim has always been for us to improve our abilities on the whole through fighting each other; if they could make Newbies with a higher baseline level of ability, they would've done that from the start. They want to hone and temper their soldiers through constant competition until they wind up with someone who's powerful enough to vanquish any opposition and stand supreme among the rest."

"What you are saying then, sir," Gale said, "is that it was not the Church's intention that Lupa be created?"

"Stop saying 'created' like that," Serph snapped, and then immediately regretted it.

Gale looked at him. "Is there a problem with my chosen terminology, sir? Newborns *are* all created by the Church."

"That's not the point," Serph muttered. "Never mind. Forget it." Looking over at the confused prisoner sitting across the table, all Serph could think was that the man who'd died five years ago had come back to life. The memory of his old leader was still fresh, even after all this time.

The word 'created' made Serph think of the equipment supplied by the vendors, or the medical supplies and weaponry they used to outfit themselves. He wasn't sure why Gale's use of the term bothered him so much, but the earnest *feeling* he had that Lupa had come back from the dead somehow made the word seem inappropriate.

Heat's expression was unreadable. He had slunked into the corner of the room, his face masked in shadow as he shifted his gaze from Gale to Serph to Lupa and back again.

Serph went on. "Maybe some irregularity really had started to crop up within the Church. The hole that suddenly appeared down in our storage area, the one Lupa came out of-- what's the story with that?"

"I have sent a number of scouts in to investigate," Gale replied. "It leads to an underground sewer system, or something of the like. I believe that the water flowing through it is the same as

the rain. The fact that it runs from Vishuddha to Muladhara leads me to believe that it must extend to the other territories as well. My best conjecture is that it is a network of pipelines that collects the Rain of the Dead that falls across the Junkyard and channels it to some location underneath the Temple for purification and rebirth."

"It would be enormous, then," Serph said. "So why didn't anyone know it existed before now?"

"I have a theory on that," Gale said. He called up a series of images on his monitor. "It is my belief that we-- meaning all of the Junkyard's inhabitants-- were until recently subjected to some kind of perception filter."

"A what?"

"It is simply a means for the Church to keep things hidden, to prevent us from seeing facilities or information they do not want us to see, or to prevent us from realizing that we had seen something previously." Gale continued to work at his console, displaying a number of images taken by the recon team of the interior of the sewer system, as well as results from analysis of the water flowing through it.

The pictures showed a sewer that was far more open and expansive than what Serph had been imagining. A wide stream of water ran beneath a smooth, high ceiling, framed by narrow walkways on either side. There was little in the way of illumination, save for an occasional pale, blue light glimmering through the murk. The presence of the walkways implied that someone-- likely agents of the Church-- was meant to traverse these tunnels. Was this network designed to allow them to come and go unseen by the reigning tribes and other denizens of the Junkyard? There was no other obvious reason for such hidden passageways.

"As a bishop, part of my own unique conditioning includes a type of perception filter; it omits extraneous factors from my thought process in order for me to prioritize the continued existence of my tribe. The very fact that I am currently able to objectively remark on my conditioning this way is itself proof that said filter is no longer in place; until now, those who had been subjected to such mental and sensory suppression were made unaware of it."

"Another side-effect of our Atma?"

"Very likely," Gale said, typing away at a second console panel.

Heat finally broke his silence. "Forget all that for right now." He nodded vaguely in Lupa's direction. "Our bigger problem is this strange... whatever-it-was that took out the Wolves and Vishuddha. That's what I want to hear about."

"Me too," Serph agreed. There was nothing to be gained right now by arguing back and forth about who-- or what-- Lupa really was. First and foremost, the tribe needed to get a better grasp on the unusual circumstances that had brought him here in the first place. "Whatever destroyed Vishuddha might come our way next-- and not just over land, but possibly through this network of underground tunnels. Keeping watch on the surface alone won't suffice." Serph sighed. "As if we didn't have enough problems to deal with right now."

Serph turned to face Lupa. "So tell us about this thing that laid waste to Vishuddha."

"Invisible?" Serph arched his eyebrows. "What do you mean it's invisible?"

"Exactly what it sounds like," Lupa said, elbows against the table as he rubbed at his temples. "Something we couldn't see made its way into our base, and it managed to slaughter most of our tribe before we even had time to react. It wasn't *intangible*--it definitely had form and substance--and sometimes we'd get a glimpse of its outline when it got splattered with blood, but a split second later it would disappear again. And it was unbelievably fast. We tried to mark it with paintballs, but scoring a hit was next to impossible. Our best snipers were all killed before they could even arm themselves."

"Do you think this is some kind of new Atma ability?" Serph asked.

"No Atma on record possesses such capabilities," Gale said. "If some type of Atma has since emerged with these abilities, then in all likelihood, it is a unique evolution that has manifested after it devoured others, or else has been triggered by some other cause."

"What sort of other cause?"

"Given the unpredictability of recent events, there is little that I am reasonably willing to rule unfeasible."

"Maybe it's this 'Angel'," Heat muttered. "Whoever or whatever they are, they piss me off. Seeing how they forced our Atma onto us, it wouldn't surprise me if they started handing out random, weird abilities willy-nilly just to spice up the fighting."

"Lupa, you said that your entire area was 'swallowed up'," Serph said, trying to bring the discussion back around to the matter at hand. "That's a pretty specific way to phrase something."

"Those of us who were left went to protect our leader and retreated deeper into the base," Lupa said. "You know the deal: if we keep our leader alive, the tribe goes on. There was an escape vehicle stored down in the basement, but before we could reach it, one of the walls exploded inwards, and this flood of pitch black, writhing mud or... something came rushing in."

Serph exchanged a quick glance with Heat. *Pitch black, writhing mud*. A series of images rushed through his mind: the trip to the Vanguard base in the wake of the confusion after the first Atma incident; the series of rooms, in complete ruin; the crazed smile on Harley Q's face as he transformed into a viscous monstrosity and absorbed the tarry substance that was all that was left of his men.

"Did it speak?" Serph asked. "Did it have a face?"

"No, nothing like that." Lupa furrowed his brow and pursed his lips as if he wanted to spit. "It flooded the hallway, swallowing up our leader, Canis Volk, and half the other men. I grabbed Volk by the hand, tried to pull him free, but I wasn't fast enough-- he was engulfed in an instance. After seeing so many people get pulled in right before our eyes, the rest of us banded together, bolted into the garage, and closed the shutter door behind us.

"While we were piling into the vehicle, though, the chutter burst open with another spray of that muck. It gunked up the tires, and a few guys were too slow getting away from it. That was when we spotted a hatch in the floor, one we'd never noticed before."

"An entryway into the sewer system."

"Apparently so." Lupa rubbed at his face again, exhausted. "There wasn't any time to think about it. We pulled it open and jumped inside. We braced ourselves in case more of that mud came gushing after us, but it never did. I don't know if it was intelligent or not, but it seemed like it was busy digesting the people it had captured back inside the vehicle."

Lupa trailed off for a moment, biting his lip. "We could hear the people who'd been swallowed up screaming from inside the muck. Inside the hole, everything was sticky with this oily, tacky sheen, probably left behind by that black... thing. We changed into our Atma forms, and burned the stuff away while searching for an exit. And we lost a few people along the way, the ones who couldn't deal with the combination of the shock and their hunger."

He took a deep, heavy breath, and rested his forehead against his hands.

"And you eventually managed to find an exit that led here, into Embryon territory?" Serph asked.

"Yeah, I guess." Lupa lowered his hands and looked at Serph again. "Looking back at it now, though, it feels like... like I'd been trying to make it here all along. The sewer system is a complete maze of passageways, and when we started, there was no way to know which way was which. But then-- I know this sounds strange-- I just started to have a sense of which way we needed to go. Don't ask me how; I don't understand it myself. But I mean it when I say I just kept thinking that, if we could make it to the Embryon, we'd be all right."

Serph gazed back into Lupa's grim, tanned face. The most logical story here was that the Wolves had heard about how the Embryon had teamed up with the Maribel and had forced the Solids into submission. Right now, the Wolves were the prime adversaries of the Brutes, the highest-ranked of all the tribes. They certainly couldn't expect refugre with their archenemy; it made more sense to seek help from the Embryon, who had already demonstrated successful cooperation with another tribe.

But what is there was some part of Lupa that remembered? What if, somewhere buried deep in his subconscious. he knew that reaching the Embryon meant reaching Heat and Serph, the two people who'd joined him in the tiny tribe he'd once led?

That was impossible, though. Lupa had already stated that he didn't remember Serph and Heat at all, and as far as he could recall, he was still a Newbie. Here in the Junkyard, the living accumulated sin in the form of karma gained through the ceaseless slaughter. That karma was washed clean after death as part of *samsara*, the cycle of reincarnation overseen by the Church; for Lupa to retain any memory went against that very principle.

And yet despite all he thought he knew of life and death, seeing this man here, his face as familiar as those of his closest friends, Serph found it hard to accept that Lupa remembered nothing of himself-- especially since the Lupa Serph had known was a man who had lived his entire life fighting alone, with his back turned to the Church.

"In that case," Gale proceeded, his tone indifferent. "what do you seek from the Embryon? The leader of the Wolves has not yet been recorded as a confirmed casualty. Your tribe still persists; is it your wish to join the Embryon regardless?"

"I have a request, and I know it's asking a lot." Lupa straightened up in his chair. "I'd like you to let my men and me bivouac here for now... and I'd like to borrow some Embryon soldiers." The look in his eyes was deathly serious. "I'd like to stage a reconnaissance mission, back to Vishuddha, so that I can see what's going on there now, and try to figure out what happened."

Serph responded without hesitation. "Request granted. And I'll go with you."

Just as quickly, Heat stepped away from the wall and unfolded his arms. "Me too."

"Sir," Gale said, standing abruptly, "you know the situation we are dealing with right now. Moreover, this man--"

"Objection noted, Gale," Serph said, holding up a hand to cut off his bishop. "I know we only have his word to go on about what happened in Vishuddha. And you're going to tell me that there's no need for the tribe leader to personally go and see if that story checks out-- that it's too dangerous."

"If you understand the logic behind my objections, sir, why do you not heed them?"

"This isn't a matter of logic, Gale." Serph was well aware that his decision was not entirely rational. There was no reason at all he should be the one to accompany Lupa. In fact, there was no proof that this wasn't simply a trap on the Wolves' part to take out the up-and-coming Embryon. But he wanted to get to the bottom of the situation, and he sensed that the strangely familiar newcomer was the key.

"Whoa, hold on! I never said I wanted your leader to come with me." Lupa looked uncomfortable. He frowned at Serph and Heat. "Don't get me wrong; having the Embryon's two highest-ranking members along would be an incredible show of support, but I'd never dream of asking that much. You should listen to your bishop. All I wanted was a little backup-- and I promise to protect whoever you send with me with my life."

"You think I need protecting?" Heat snorted. "Let's get one thing straight: I don't give a damn whether you're the real Lupa or not. I'm going with you because this thing you told us sounds like a threat, a potential enemy, so I'm going there to fight it. That's all." He jabbed a finger in Lupa's direction. "And don't think that doesn't apply to you, too; Lupa or not, if it turns out you present any sort of threat to us, I'll treat you like one."

"You don't need to worry about protecting us, Lupa. We can look after ourselves," Serph said, mentally adding, *"just like you taught us to."* He understood Heat's reluctance to believe the refugee. Heat had always had an independent streak, even back when he'd been serving under the first Lupa. He'd heeded his commands because he respected the man's skills as a leader, but he was never one to simply follow orders blindly, then or now.

"There's a lot about what you said that concerns us," Serph said. "But I'd like to see things for myself. I'm sure you can understand that, Gale."

The bishop shook his head. "It presents too great a risk, sir. It would be far more efficient if I were to go in your stead. I will be able to gather data and perform simple analyses on-location, and I--"

"How many times have I had to tell you how valuable a bishop you are?" Serph interrupted, silencing his tactician. "You know full well that bishops aren't intended for front-line deployment. And besides, you've already got other responsibilities that I've given you."

Gale fell silent. In the wake of the serious blow the tribe had taken from the Solids, he and Argilla had been tasked with finding a new location to his Sera, and then moving her there safely. Already, they had narrowed down the options to a handful of potential locations; they would be making the final decision and heading out within the next two or three days. There were a whole number of associated tasks that still needed to be carried out, such as selecting personnel, conducting advanced scouting of the prospective locations, and sorting through all of the associated intelligence.

"The rationale behind your intended actions is illogical in the extreme. I do not comprehend."

Serph thought he saw a flicker of condemnation in Gale's emerald eyes. "Yeah, I bet you don't. I'm being selfish here, Gale. I admit it. And I apologize for that. But just this once, let it slide, all right? I promise you that I'll come back in one piece."

"I am unsure how you can promise such a thing," replied Gale. "However, I do understand that, in the heat of battle, it is you and you alone who can act to ensure your own safety, sir." He sat back down, and then looked at Lupa. "If our leader is going to accompany you, Lupa-- or whoever you are--I would like to hear what assurances of safety you can offer. The men that you have brought with you are insufficient; not only are they all mere Newborns, they are past the point of exhaustion."

"Gale," Serph growled.

The bishop ignored him. His icy stare remained fixed on Lupa. "In the event that you do not return safely with our leader, you and your men will be hunted down and executed. But the Embryon will not accede to your request in the first place unless you provide some additional form of assurance."

"Very well. Here." Lupa sifted through the pouch at his hip and pulled out a dull, silvery ring which he set atop the table. "Have a look at that. That's the tag ring of Canis Volk, the leader of the Wolves."

Without a word Gale reached for the ring and set it on a panel at his terminal. The authentication system read the personal ID off the ring and displayed the data and combat record of its owner on the monitor.

"It appears to be authentic," Gale said. "How did you come to be in possession of it?"

"It must have come off when I grabbed him and tried to pull him out of that muck. I didn't realize it was in my hand until afterward."

Duplicating a tag ring was effectively impossible. The Church closely guarded the method by which they were made, and any attempt at tampering with one would cause it to self-destruct.

"I'll leave that here with you," Lupa said. "If at any point you think that I've led your leader into some kind of trap, present that ring to the Church and inform them that the Embryon have subjugated the Wolves. If I come back alone, or if I try to make a run for it, then you can bring me in and execute me."

"And so we will," Gale said. He typed a rarely used key sequence into his console, turning off the monitor and depositing the tag ring into a box that opened in the table.

"Then it's settled," Serph said, before any further objections could be made. "Tomorrow, Heat and I will go with Lupa to investigate Vishuddha. While we're doing that, Gale, I want you to carry on with your latest mission, and inform me of your position once you're finished. We'll probably move Embryon headquarters there as well. This 'invisible Atma' has me concerned. We can't be too careful."

Gale hesitated for a moment, as if struggling to find something to say. At last he simply cast his eyes down and said, "Understood, sir," his slender lips pursed so tightly together that they nearly vanished.

"Why did we come here?" Lupa asked, confused. "Vishuddha is farther away."

Svadhisthana, once the territory of the Vanguards, was now fully under the Embryon's control. Serph had led the reconnaissance team there, to the ruins of the old Vanguard base where his tribe had defeated their rivals' monstrous leader.

"There's something I want to check out first," Serph said, nodding to the Embryon guards who saluted as he walked past them. "Heat, you were the last person with Harley Q's corpse, right?" *And the one who ate it,* he thought, keeping that part to himself.

"Yeah," Heat replied. While thinking back on those events caused Serph no small amount of consternation, to Heat, it was probably just one more thing that was over and done, in the past. "I ate about half of it-- can't say he tasted all that good-- and then burned the leftovers. I can't see how he'd still be alive after all that. Do you think Harley managed to survive and then escape?"

"It's a possibility."

The amorphous monstrosity of black muck that Lupa described sounded a lot like the abomination Harly Q had become, the one Serph and the others had battled when they'd first consciously awakened into their Atma. They'd lacked any real understanding of their own powers back then, and hadn't known how to use them to greatest effect in battle. Serph found himself suddenly wondering if the thing had simply let them escape with their lives.

"It's *not* a possibility," Heat insisted. "Don't underestimate my flames. After I'd eaten my fill, I reduced whatever was left of him to ash, through and through. I remember how strongly he was clinging to life, so I made sure to do a damn thorough job to match."

"I'm sure you did, but--"

"Look, you don't have to tell me the whole story," Lupa interrupted, warily scanning his surroundings as they made their way through the ruined base, "but if you're going to argue about this, could someone at least fill me in on what happened here?"

There wasn't any real reason to keep it a secret, so Serph told Lupa about the mysterious, bud-like object that had appeared during their standoff with the Vanguards, and the strange lights

it unleashed that had imbued them with their Atma. Then he explained what had happened with the Vanguard leader, Harley Q, and the grisly resolution of his battle with the Embryon.

"Is that what happened, then?" Lupa brushed his fingers over the black Atma brand on his abdomen, his face a mix of conflicting emotions. "We already had our Atma when we were sent out through the Temple gates. But it definitely sounds like this Harley Q of yours and the black muck I saw are at least similar. The only difference is in the sheer size-- and the fact that I didn't feel any real intelligence from the thing I saw, or at least not any driving will behind it. All I sensed was an incredible hunger, nothing more. If you really did destroy the corpse that thoroughly, and it still managed to recover, then we're dealing with an incredibly powerful Atma."

"I worry that we may not be dealing with an Atma at all," Serph said. "Even if it doesn't have any sort of human intellect, if it's as powerful as it seems, we might have a battle for our very survival on our hands."

"Bring it on," Heat said with a snort. "If it wants another go at me, I'll be happy to fry it up again. Simple as that. No sense yammering about it."

Serph only wished that it really *could* be as simple as that.

After about a half hour of clambering through the rubble, the group finally made its way to the inner sanctum of the Vanguard base. This was where Harley Q had made his last stand. Serph could hear some of the tribesmen who'd come along searching inside.

The room was even more of a disaster area than Serph remembered. The intensity of Heat's flames had melted the walls and ceiling in several places, to the point that even the concrete had begun to drip. The soot was so thick it looked as though the room had been painted black. Even now, the stench of burnt and rotten flesh hung in the air, thick and pungent. Every whiff stirred unwelcome memories, and each footstep kicked up clouds of cinders and ash, making it hard even to breathe.

"Has anything changed since you were last in here, Heat?"

"Doesn't look like it." Heat tilted his head back, eyes narrowing as he took a deep sniff of the air; then he knelt and scooped up some ash onto a fingertip, his nose wrinkling. He clapped his hands together to clean them as he stood upright again.

"Is there any trace of Harley?" Lupa asked.

"Not as far as I can tell," Serph said. "But I don't know if that's because he managed to get away, or because he was still bound to the Junkyard order-- become rain after he died. returning to the wells underneath the Temple. After we trashed this place, the Embryon were in a pretty severe state of disarray. Posting lookouts here wasn't exactly our highest priority. If that's when he escaped, I don't think we would have noticed."

"But if he managed to survive and get away, then the Church shouldn't have acknowledged the Embryon's defeat of the Vanguards," Lupa said. "The Solids have been all but wiped out, and we don't know whether the leader of the Wolves is alive or dead, but neither of those tribes has been disbanded. If the Church ruled that the Embryon were victorious over the Vanguards, shouldn't we assume that they were able to confirm that Harley Q was dead?"

Serph pulled at his chin as he thought. If Lupa was right, it made the black substance that had attacked the Wolves all the more concerning. If the Church was certain that Harley Q was dead, then what in the world could this new creature be? And what, for that matter, was the invisible Atma that had slaughtered so many of the Wolves?

"Sir!" An Embryon soldier came in through the warped door frame, panting. "We found it, over on the far side of the base. I don't know how we didn't notice it before. It leads to some kind of stonework waterway. Looks like it goes on for quite a ways."

"I thought so. Lead the way." Serph motioned for Heat and Lupa to follow as he headed out of the room.

"What did you have them looking for?" asked Heat.

"An entrance to the sewer system, like the one back in the Embryon base. If there really is a secret network of passageways used by the Church, there had to be a way into it in all of the different areas. Now that the perception filter is no longer in effect, I figured we'd find one here."

"We're not going to go to Vishuddha overland?" Lupa asked. Svadhisthana did share a border with the Wolves' territory. There was no need to travel underground to reach their goal.

"It looks like this black substance is using the sewer system to move around," Serph said. As he stepped outside, he squinted as the light hit his eyes. "If this thing really isn't Harley-- if it's something else-- then we need to learn more about it, and that means checking out where it operates. Which might mean we'll be looking at a fight."

Heat licked his lips. "I sure hope so." His mouth split into a feral grin, flashing his pointy white teeth. He looked back over his shoulder at Lupa. "I can't wait to show you how much stronger we've become since you died-- if you're the real Lupa, that is."

"If I am, I've already said I don't remember any of what happened before. But it's just as well." Lupa let out a dry laugh. "Let's go have some fun."

As they prepared to head down into the sewers, Serph found himself confronted with a platoon of soldiers who insisted they needed to accompany him. Gale had-- of his own accord-- pre-selected a ten-member team from amongst the troops in Svadhisthana to accompany the tribe leader.

"But sir, the bishop ordered us to protect you at all costs."

"And I'm saying that's not necessary. We can take care of ourselves."

Gale had never been the most flexible of bishops, but he'd never been quite this obstinate. Sending along a security escort that only identified itself after Serph had left the Embryon territory was nothing short of underhanded.

"We don't need an escort, all right? I want you guys to stay on guard here in Svadhisthana. Do you have a comm link on you?"

"Ah, of course. Here you are, sir."

Serph snatched up the device and directed a call to Gale. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "I told you that I was going alone with Heat and Lupa."

"Sir. as your bishop, I cannot endorse such an independent course of action," the bishop replied, his voice distorted by the static on the link. "It is possible that this man claiming to be Lupa possesses an Atma with new, unknown capabilities we cannot predict. Moreover, even presuming that this invisible Atma of which he spoke does indeed exist, and needs to be investigated, we have only Lupa's word to go by insofar as his stated reasons for coming to the Embryon. As bishop, ensuring your personal safety is my highest priority. I beseech you, sir, as our leader, to display a better sense of self-preservation."

Heat flashed a smile, Serph glared back at him, and spoke harshly into the link. "We'll have a nice, long chat about that when I get back. For now, I'm ditching the security detail. End of story. Consider that an order if you have to. We're heading into territory of a tribe that's still technically a going concern. If there are survivors there, I don't want to risk provoking them."

"Such is the reality of the Junkyard, sir."

For a moment, Serph was at a loss for words. "Look, I don't care," he growled through gritted teeth. "You can lecture me later. I'm countermanding the orders you gave these men and assigning them back to their normal guard duties. Over and out."

"Sir, I--"

Serph cut the connection, then handed the comm link back to the soldier. "Sorry about that, Lupa. That's just how Gale is. Don't worry about it."

"He's got a good point, really. You're the ones who surprise me." Lupa laughed. Evidently he had overheard Gale's end of the conversation. "Putting so much trust in some random Newbie who just showed up at your base out of nowhere, I mean. I'm glad that you trust me... though maybe if I had some memory of the way you are, I wouldn't be so surprised. I'll try not to get you into too much trouble with that bishop of yours."

"Thanks," Serph said. He then saw that the soldier was still timidly holding out the comm link. He felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Do I have another call?"

"No. No, it isn't that, sir," the man said, clearly embarrassed. "But the bishop said that you'd probably refuse the escort, and that if you did, to make sure that you at least took a comm link. He said it's got a homing beacon fitted inside, and a two-way emergency call function. He said that this situation requires him to be able to contact you, and that he hoped you'd, uh, 'acknowledge your responsibilities as leader at least that much'-- his words, sir." The infantryman had turned beet red. "Oh, and uh, he also added that you are 'strictly forbidden to break this one like last time.'"

Serph was speechless. Lupa, who had been struggling to maintain his composure, burst into raucous laughter. Heat, on the hand, put on a sullen expression, and muttered, "That damn automation."

"Looks like you lose this round, Serph of the Embryon," Lupa said between chuckles. He took the comm link from the soldier and handed it to Serph. "That's quite the bishop you've got on your hands. You should be thankful. Seems nowadays you can't find a bishop anywhere."

Serph accepted the comm link without a word, feeling his irritation welling up inside him. His face twisted briefly with discomfort as he inserted the device into his ear.

The sewer passageway leading away from Svadhisthana looked identical to the one that ran from Muladhara, with dark, moss-green water flowing silently beneath a high stonework ceiling. Dim lights glinted off the water's surface. Serph and the others climbed down through the hatchway, their footfalls echoing into the distance.

"Do you remember coming through here, Lupa? There's a good chance you would have taken this route on your way to the Embryon territory."

"Hmm. Give me a second." Lupa scampered down a rampway and took a peek around a nearby corner. "Ah, there we go." He waved the other two over. They padded up to him, and saw a white mark on the wall, made with the paint the Wolves used for their tribal markings. "We marked the intersections we came through. We didn't know if we'd be able to find our way back, so we figured it wouldn't hurt to leave a trail to lead the way."

Heat grinned. "Smart move."

"Yeah. Reminds me of something you always used to say to us," Serph said, a smile coming reflexively to his face. "Always keep the worst and the best in mind. Thinking of the worst will keep you wary; thinking of the best will give you the drive to press on."

Lupa turned to him. "The old me used to say that, huh? Looks like it's advice that stuck pretty well." Serph couldn't tell if the look on his face was proud or sheepish.

"Do you really not remember, Lupa? After all we went through together?" the Embryon commander asked. Everything he'd seen of the man so far made him reluctant to believe, deep down, that his former leader's memories weren't in there somewhere.

"I don't," Lupa said, his expression turning vaguely apologetic. "Like I told you back at your base, I don't remember anything before leaving the Temple as a Newbie. But if you don't mind, after we're done with this reconnaissance, I'd like to hear more about this other me that you used to know. I can't say I'm not intrigued. If he was the one who brought the two of you up, he must've been quite the guy."

Serph nodded silently, then turned his gaze to the dark passageway ahead. Now was not the time to get caught up in reminiscence.

And yet the memories came to him unbidden-- of a time long ago, before he had been given his Atma, before he was a leader, before there was even a tribe called the Embryon, when he'd been a mere Newborn, fresh out of the Temple gates. The whole of his life before he awakened to his Atma now felt like it belonged to another person-- everything, that was, except for those earliest memories, which were still so strangely and perfectly clear.

Perhaps these recollections had been stimulated by the presence of this strange doppelganger, here now with the two men who had been the first Lupa's constant companions. Most devastating was the scene that played out in Serph's dreams, of his old leader's death; seeing this new Lupa

now, in flesh and blood, brought back a series of wrenching moments from the very depths of his consciousness, playing out like a slideshow.

When Newborns were created by the Church, they spent their first few days in Sahasrara, the inviolate central territory the Church controlled. Soon, however, each headed out into the battlefield in which they would all compete: either they were recruited as new soldiers by the other tribes, or else they had the drive and ambition to band together to form a tribe of their own.

Which of those two had Heat wanted to choose? If Lupa hadn't come along when he had, then in all likelihood, Serph thought, Heat would have struck out into the Junkyard alone, taking orders from no one as he strove to improve himself. Since the emergence of the Atma, Heat had shown a marked and growing distaste for anyone interfering with his business, and -- with the exception of Serph, whom he recognized as an equal-- he scoffed at the idea of anyone trying to tell him what to do. Really, he'd had that inclination back when he was a Newborn; all his Atma had done was make it that much more pronounced.

And yet the old Lupa possessed a presence so intense that a mere look from him was enough to bring Heat into line.

After first leaving the Temple gates, Newbies spent a few days in a domed building in Sahasrara called the Nest. Here, they were outfitted with basic personal equipment, weapons, and combat suits, along with food and water to last a few days. The leaders of different tribes, or their representatives, would come to this facility to evaluate new soldiers for any signs of promise.

The interior of the dome was set up as a sort of sparse athletic training area. As often as not, various Newbies could be found there standing around obliviously, milling about in haphazard clumps, or curled up sleeping in the blankets they'd been provided. There were areas where mock combats were permitted for the purposes of personal training, but only during certain times; those who fought outside of the designated times met with punishment from the warrior priests. The individuals who were born with a more clever and creative streak would steal the equipment from their more dimwitted comrades and slit their throats while they slept.

Because deadly fighting was forbidden in Sahasrara, these kills were not counted towards the killers' Combat Points. Nonetheless there was a motivation for such cold-blooded behavior: getting one's hand on more equipment than the other combatants provided a tangible advantage for the no-holds-barred fighting that awaited them. The Newbies that started life with the brutal inclination to seek an advantage also had a leg up once it came time to join the Junkyard proper. In effect, the competition began even before any Newborns left the Nest; even in inviolate Sahasrara, the reality of the purgatory that was to come was inescapable.

Serph had been staring at an unfortunate fellow Newborn-- robbed and beheaded in his sleep-- when Lupa came into the dome. The imposing newcomer had watched impassively as the headless corpse was taken away, dripping blood in its wake; then he'd taken a look at the group of rookie soldiers and said, "You two, red hair and silver hair-- you're with me," before turning on his heels and heading back out.

It had been a matter of course that Newbies followed along with those who requested them, and so Serph and Heat had thought nothing strange of obeying. But looking back on it now,

Serph wondered why Lupa had selected the two of them. Heat was visibly a strong and powerful combatant, to be sure, but Serph was a slender, small-statured man who didn't look particularly tough, and he'd been all the more so back when he was a Newborn. So why Heat and him?

Before the awakening of his Atma, harboring such doubts would have been unthinkable, and so he'd never thought to question it. Now, staring ahead at this new Lupa as the broad-shouldered man led the way forward, as he had so many times before, there was so much he wanted to ask.

Why did you choose us?

Why did you always fight so recklessly?

What made you want to raise us?

What had Lupa felt back then? What had he been thinking? Could any of them have even 'thought' back then?

After just under two years with Serph and Heat, Lupa had died. It was almost as if he had been waiting for the time when the two of them could go on fighting without him.

Why did you choose us, Lupa?

"Hold it," Lupa said suddenly, his voice yanking Serph out of his reverie.

At once, Serph was back on his guard, slinking into an alcove in the wall that Lupa indicated. For the briefest of moments, Lupa peeked out from behind the cover, peering ahead. "Someone's coming. I think it's-- yes, just one."

Heat squinted. "Is that white paint?" A lone man was ambling toward them from deeper in the dimly lit sewer, his steps faltering. His combat suit and upper right arm were marked in white paint. "He must be another escapee from the Wolves, looking for help."

"No. Look closer." Lupa's voice had gone steely, and his gaze was fixed on the man's face.

It was a face completely devoid of expression, vacant and lacking and sense of will. His mouth hung agape, and his body moved with jerking movements as if it were a puppet on strings. His eyes drifted in their sockets, each pointing in different directions, and his skin was pallid and clammy looking, almost to the point of transparency-- not unlike the sewer water itself.

Then his eyeballs rolled about, and at last both looked forward.

"Here he comes!" Lupa barked as he sprung out from cover. Serph followed right on his heels. There was an odd feeling the air. Off to his side he could sense Heat, could feel the tension that gripped the larger man's body. They exchanged glances, and each knew at once what the other was thinking. For a moment, Heat's face scrunched up in consternation, but he shook it off, and the wild fire returned to his eyes.

Heat can feel it, too, Serph thought. *Just like old times.*

The Atma symbol on Serph's cheek tingled, and the command words ran through the back of his mind.

Lupa gave the order. "Go!" A moment later, Serph emerged from a flash of blue light in the form of Varuna. At the same moment Heat transformed into the fiery Agni.

The man approaching the trio began to shudder violently, his head shaking from side to side. His already-gaping mouth split open impossibly wide. His eyeballs were forced out of his skull from the inside, popping free with a wet, sucking sound.

A black, formless substance gushed forth from the man's yawning, cavernous mouth, and then from his hollowed-out eye sockets and his nostrils, out of his ears-- every orifice of his body began to discharge an unceasing rush of organic filth. The goop piled up where it splattered onto the ground, expanding and expanding until the man's body was engulfed fully within its mass.

Lupa roared, a cry of pure rage and lamentation. While the sound was still echoing through the sewer, his body was wreathed in the blue light of transformation. A whirlwind of flame whipped itself up around him, singing the tips of the approaching tendrils of muck, forcing them to writhe back out of reach.

Lupa had become a regal and imposing four-legged beast, nearly six meter long from its three heads to its lashing, blade-tipped tail. His pelt was like iron needles that spiked upwards, flowing back along his heaving flanks and glimmering like gunmetal. A stream of fiery sparks dripped from between his fangs. The middle head was the largest, and as he arched his bristling back it let out a feral roar.

"So that's Cerberus," Serph mused aloud.

"Heh. Not bad," Heat said. "Not bad at all." Serph could hear the faint tinge of awe in Heat's voice.

It was disorienting, really, how everything had changed so completely, and yet how everything had remained the same. Nothing had been lost. As Heat rushed in to join the fray, Serph could feel some part of him relishing the thrill of battle, his blood stirring.

The formless *thing* moved as a single, undulating mass, sending out a series of tendrils, one after the other, almost too quick for the naked eye to track. Varuna extended the blade from his right hand, hacking away the tendrils that darted for him, but he recoiled as he felt an unusual sensation. The viscous substance grew more flexible as he struck it, attempting to wrap around the blade and pull it into itself.

Flames roared around him, and a set of three steely heads butted him aside. "You can't hack it apart hand-to-hand, Serph," Lupa growled, fire escaping Cerberus's mouths with every breath. "We were attacked by these things more than once on our way through the sewer. You need to drive them back with fire, or find some other way to destroy the whole mass all at once."

"Like getting rid of trash in the incinerator. Too easy!" Heat, in the form of Agni, strode forward, calling up massive balls of fire in each hand. "Be gone!"

The pair of fireballs struck the abomination simultaneously with a thunderous boom. The stench of burning oil filled the air, along with a spine-tingling shriek devoid of all humanity-- a sound like grating metal. The mass began to boil and bubble as parts of it broke off, reduced to ash and soot; but it was still moving. Its volume reduced by half from Cerberus's and Agni's flames, it begane to slink away, retreating further into the sewer.

"Don't let it get away, Serph!" Lupa commanded, but Serph was already in action, calling upon his power of ice. He let the energy well up inside him, then unleashed it in a single blast at the writhing thing as it attempted to slip down into the waterway. A white mist rushed forth, blanketing the area in frost. The thing let out another groaning sounds as it writhed in pain. It

extended a pseudopod toward the water's surface, but it was frozen in place. Varuna's chilling blast froze the surrounding water as well, halting the putrid mass at the edge of the watercourse.

Varuna relaxed his stance as Agni and Cerberus once more unleashed gouts of flame. With nowhere left to go, the remaining muck pressed itself against the wall, letting out another metallic screech. After the fire washed over it, it could only wriggle weakly. Varuna stepped in and sliced the frozen form in two. Agni and Cerberus enveloped each half in a roaring spiral of flame, burning them up in an instant, leaving only crumbling piles of ashes that soon collapsed, toppling and slinking into the now-thawed water as lifeless bits of detritus.

"It is done," Lupa said, casting off the form of the three-headed beast. The copper-skinned man stood at the pathway's edge, staring contemplatively down into the watery depths where the thing that had once been his comrade had sunk. "I think he was the first to get swallowed up by that thing when it hit our base. We only ever spoke a handful of times, but it still makes my stomach turn to have seen him like this."

"Did you run into this a lot, Lupa?" Serph asked, having likewise emerged from his transformation. "Coming under attack from this thing taking the form of your fellow escapees?"

Lupa remained lost in thought for a moment, then snapped back to attention and looked up. "No. This is the first time. I don't know what to call that thing, but whatever it is, it looks like it's learning. When it attacked us before, it was in guise of that shapeless black mass. It never took the form of the dead. I think it's just been wandering about down here in the sewers."

"I'm not sure if we're dealing with an Atma here," Serph said. He stared blankly at the water for a while as it flowed past, and then he shook his head. "When we fought Harley Q, there was still part of him that lingered after his transformation. I didn't sense any human intellect from this thing just now. But it wasn't the same as when we lost control of ourselves after our initial rampage. It's hard to put into words."

"Does it matter?" Heat asked, also back in human form now. "If we get attacked again, we just get rid of it the same way. That's all there is to it."

"You say that, Heat," Lupa replied, "but what if *I'm* a corpse being controlled by that muck? It's a possibility." He shot Heat a sidelong glance.

"No. It's not/" Heat squared his shoulders. "The way you fight, there's no chance you're the same as that...stuff. Whether you're the real Lupa or not is a whole other story-- but either way, you're worthy to fight at our side."

"You didn't seem to have any issue taking orders from him, either," Serph said with a grin. A look of annoyance crossed Heat's face for a moment, and he opened his mouth as if to speak; but he simply turned away in a huff and folded his arms.

"Oh, speaking of which," Lupa said, turning to Serph, "I'm sorry about that. It wasn't my place to give orders. My apologies. I don't know why I did that, really; it all just kind of...happened."

"Don't worry about it," Serph said with a wave of his hand. "It was actually kind of fun-- and hey, I followed your orders without thinking about it, myself. You haven't changed, Lupa. You might have the body of a Newbie, but inside, you're still the Lupa that we used to know."

"If you say so." Lupa smiled uneasily. "But to be honest here, I got that feeling, too-- that the three of us fought together like this a long, long time ago. I know it doesn't make sense, but I felt it all the same."

Serph smiled. "There's no need to rush it," he said. "If you can't remember that's all right. What matters is that you're alive, here and now.

"All right. Let's keep going. We can't be too far from Vishuddha now."

Following the marks Lupa had left, it didn't take them much longer to reach Vishuddha. They paused beneath an access hatch; faint beams of light shone around its rim. The ladder was warped, and the area nearby was caked with scum that reeked of the foul black mass.

Serph's mouth twisted with disgust. "Has anything changed since you came through here, Lupa?"

"It's hard to say. It was total chaos. Be careful on your way up, though; there's still the invisible Atma to consider."

Serph nodded, then began his ascent. The corroded metal creaked under his feet. He pushed the hatch upward and then shoved it open, and his eyes were treated to a sight of complete carnage.

As he stepped up onto the floor, there was a squelch as his foot sank into ankle-deep muck. It was a mix of sticky black goo and blood, forming a nauseating sludge that clung to his boot. Reflexively he covered his nose and mouth with his hand, the foul stench of rotten flesh making each breath nauseating. Even Heat twisted his face in distaste.

It was hard to tell whether the corpses had been devoured or partly dissolved by some other means. Serph was reminded of Svadhisthana; but there, there'd been signs of resistance. What had happened here was nothing less than a one-sided slaughter.

There were a few bullet holes and other marks of battle visible on the walls, but most of the guns littered on the ground hadn't even been fired. The footprints in the black-smeared floor were hasty, panicked, chaotic-- the last traces of people who had been killed so quicky that they'd had no chance to unleash their Atma, or even bring their guns to bear.

"And I thought things in Svadhisthana were bad," Heat said, voice muffled by his cape, which he'd pulled up to cover his nose.

"These people didn't have a chance to fight back," Lupa said. "By the time we realized we were under attack, a dozen or so men had already been ripped to shreds. We fired blindly, and the only things we hit were the walls or our fellow tribesmen. And that whole time, the invisible Atma butchered us one by one, mocking us with its laughter as it did. If we had taken any longer to get our leader out of there, the whole lot of us would have wound up as food for the thing."

"And this invisible Atma didn't go after the rest of you while you retreated?"

"We stayed on our guard for it, of course, but-- now that you mentioned it, that *is* odd," Lupa said, tilting his head. "It had managed to kill so many of us in such a short time. There were only about thirty of us left; if it had come after the rest of us to finish us off, then the Wolves would have been done for, right then and there. But it didn't. The black ooze came at us while we were making our escape, though, so maybe that's what stopped it."

"You don't think the invisible Atma and the black ooze are connected?" Serph asked.

"I'm just speculating, here," Lupa said, shaking his head. "but maybe this invisible Atma can only remain active for a limited time, or maybe it was simply trying to kill as many people as it could as quickly as possible. Looking back, it only spent maybe fifteen or twenty minutes, tops, slaughtering our people. That seems awfully short for how long an Atma should be able to stay active."

Serph nodded. Typical individuals should keep their Atma in effect for five or six hours, and --according to Gale's estimate-- some could stay active for upwards of half a day. Sometimes, particularly if the possessor was wounded, a transformation could be forcibly undone, but fifteen or twenty minutes seemed far too short a window of activity for someone who had sustained no damage at all.

"The invisible Atma clearly had some kind of intellect behind its actions," Lupa continued, "but the black ooze never gave the impression it was actually *thinking*. I suspect that whatever that... *thing* is, it may only be a pawn in someone else's game."

"The Church?" Serph suggested.

"Who knows?" Heat said, forcing his way back into the conversation. "I don't think we can trust anything the Church says, not since this 'Angel' decided to get involved. Maybe he's running the whole show over there now. We've barely heard anything from them since they gave us information on our Atma."

Heat was right. Before the initial onset of the Atma phenomenon, the Church of Karma had been the absolute authority of the Junkyard, serving as its directors and mediators; lately, however, its presence had noticeably diminished. The Church had always been quick to arbitrate tribal disputes and order cease-fires, but in the past month, there had been only two announcements and one request for meetings. Since the bizarre audience in the Temple after the first Atma incident, it had taken hardly any action at all.

The Church network was accessible, and the white-clad warrior priests still stood guard in Sahasrara, but the old laws bound the tribes less and less by the day, and the supreme authority was losing its position as the unquestioned ruler of the Junkyard. In the old days, the Church would have stepped in to dissolve the alliance between the Embryon and the Maribel almost immediately-- but the union had persisted for many days now, apparently with the priests' tacit consent.

Things are changing, Serph thought to himself, and he felt a brief twinge of unease at the realization that he wasn't sure where those changes might lead.

As if reading his mind, Lupa set one of his big, strong hands on Serph's shoulder. "Don't dwell on it. Like you said yourself, the important thing is that we're alive. We're alive, and we're still here. What else can we really ask for?"

"Yeah. You're right." Serph nodded, feeling his trepidation diminish. "If the leader of the Wolves is still alive, we should go look for him. The Church still hasn't issued a confirmation of his death, so there still might be a chance for us to save him."

That optimism, however, turned out to be premature. As they made their way through the Wolves' base, its walls and floors caked with dark, tacky blood and stinking grime, it was Lupa who finally made the discovery.

The three had made their way warily into a small chamber, slipping through an entryway that had partially collapsed. The concrete door frame had melted, and now black grime clung to it like mold. Serph and Heat winced as they brushed against the slime with their hands; then they saw Lupa's face fall as he gazed into one corner of the tiny room.

"What's wrong?" Heat demanded, sensing the other man's dismay. The red-haired trooped immediately began to call upon his Atma, but Lupa held him back with a firm hand.

"What is it, Lupa?" Serph asked. "What's there?"

Lupa shifted to one side, wordlessly pointing at what he had seen. A growl rose from Heat's throat, and Serph held back the wave of nausea.

In the far corner was something that looked like a wax replica of a human face, stretched and misshapen as if it had melted.

It appeared to be male, but so distorted that it was hard to tell more than that. And yet, somehow, it was still alive. Its mouth was opening and closing, though no sound came from within. Eyes without pupils darted about in constant motion, focusing on nothing in particular. More black grime was spread around it, though not enough to suggest the remains of an entire human body-- there was nothing left of the man but the face.

"Is that the leader of the Wolves?" Serph asked.

"Yes. That's Canis Volk." The man had only been his leader for a short time, but Lupa was clearly filled with dismay at the wretched sight. "It looks like that black much dissolves the people it engulfs in order to grow. It's a miracle that there's anything left of him. I don't understand how he's still alive-- though I think he would have been better off if the thing had finished the job."

A faint groan came from the deformed face. A string of drool dripped down from its twisted lips. Serph leaned closer so that he could hear.

"Kill...me..."

The voice was raspy and hoarse. *"Kill me... Let me die. End it... Please..."*

Lupa stood frozen. Serph set a hand on his shoulder. "You heard what he wants. Do you want to do it, or should I?"

A brief shudder ran through Lupa's body. and then he slowly looked away from the thing that had been his leader. "You do it, Serph." His voice was faint. "Even if it wasn't for long, he was still my leader; I can't take up arms against him. I think he'd be content, being taken out by the leader of another tribe. That's what the Junkyard is about."

Serph nodded, then called his Atma into his right arm. In an instant his forearm was wreathed in blue light, and a long, white blade sprang from within. Lupa and Heat both retreated a step as they watched. Serph drew back his arm, and then thrust the blade cleanly through what remained of the man who had once been Canis Volk.

From his lips came one final sigh, tinged with what might have been relief; and then Canis Volk, leader of the Wolves, slowly shut his eyes. As Serph withdrew his blade, the face crumbled into a pile of waxy dust.

"This makes me sick," Heat said, his voice heavy with disgust. "This was no way to die. To die in battle is one thing, but this-- having to beg for a mercy killing-- it turns my stomach. Just who the hell is doing this to us? What do they want?"

No one had an answer for that. Without saying a word, Serph folded his blade back into his arm and shifted the limb back to human form. Lupa continued to stare vacantly at the crumbled remnants of his leader.

A call chime broke the silence. Serph's hand shot up to his ear. "Gale? What's going on?"

"We are currently engaged with the enemy along the border of Manipura and Muladhara, sir." There was a hint of tension in his voice. "The enemy force includes Bat and Mick the Slug, along with what I believe to be members of the Brutes. It would appear that, after their previous escape, Bat and Mick surrendered to the Brutes and sought their assistance. Also, I am unsure how the information was leaked to them, but they know about Sera. You must return here at once, sir."

"They what? Gale, I need a status report--"

A burst of static cut off Serph's request and overwhelmed the channel. The line went dead. With a pale face he turned the transmitter off, then looked at Lupa and Heat.

"What is it?" Lupa asked. "Is something wrong?"

"The enemy's found out about Sera."

The colour drained from Heat's face. "Impossible!"

Lupa, who had not been told about the girl's existence or her remarkable powers, looked puzzled. "Sera? Who's that?"

"I'm sorry to have to do this, Lupa," Serph said, already making his way back towards the exit, "but we'll have to put our search on hold for now. Gale's probably already sent a runner our way, but we have to hurry. If they manage to get their hands on Sera, it'll be too late."

"I'm not sure what's going on," Lupa said, following close behind, "but I'm ready to help. I've learned what happened to my leader; that's all I needed. Where are we headed? I heard something about the border of Manipura and Muladhara?"

"That's right. Once we're able to reestablish a connection, I'm sure Gale will send along more specific coordinates."

"Then we should move fast. The quickest way from here is to cut through Sahasrara." Lupa's body glowed blue as it shifted into the form of a massive, three-headed beast. His steely mane arched back, body aquiver as he let out a howl. "Cerberus is faster than your humanoid forms," the large center head rumbled, breathing flame with every word. "Hop on. Now it's my turn to help you."

Cerberus was swift indeed-- as fast as the Sphinx, Zaphir, or perhaps ever-so-slightly faster. Considering that the mighty hound was more than twice the size of a Sphinx, Serph was impressed-- even more so seeing as Lupa's Atma was carrying both Serph and Heat on his back. Before they knew it, they had made it out of Vishuddha; it took a mere thirty minutes more to breeze through Sahasrara and arrive in Manipura.

As soon as they crossed the border, the static interference cleared up, and they were able to reestablish a communication channel.

"What's your status, Gale? Report."

"We are holding out for now, sir, but we must find a way to deal with this situation as soon as possible." Apprehension still colored Gale's voice. "We are at coordinates MNP-a-632, roughly two kilometers southeast of the Maribel base. We came under attack while attempting to transfer the girl to Manipura. Currently, Jinana and Argilla are spearheading our counteroffensive. I have sent Zaphir to rendezvous with you; what is your current location, sir?"

"We've already crossed over into Manipura. I'm sending along our coordinates. Have Zaphir meet us here." The moment he cut the transmission, he saw the flutter of a golden mane atop a tall mound of shattered concrete.

"Serph of the Embryon! Are you all right?"

"Zaphir, you made it here already? That was fast."

"I caught your scent as soon as you reached Manipura. Follow me!" The metallic bite of blood hung in the air as the golden-furred, quadrupedal form bounded closer; clearly Zaphir had made short work of a number of foes on her way to the rendezvous. Blood dripped from her fangs and claws, and her pelt was spattered with still more; it wasn't clear if the latter was her own or that of her enemies.

Her face, framed by her soft, bushy mane, peered warily at the unfamiliar Atma. "What-- who-- is this?"

"Ah, right," Serph said. "His name is Lupa, a former member of the Wolves; this is his Atma form, Cerberus. He brought us here from Vishuddha."

"We don't have time for small talk, Serph," said Cerberus. The Sphinx backed away with a start as the canine beast spat fire with his words. "We're in a race against time. Mount her back, and go as fast as you can. I'll be able to run faster if I'm only carrying Heat."

"Good idea. Let's go, Zaphir!"

"Yes, sir!" For the time being, Zaphir seemed content that this strange new Atma at least wasn't an enemy. She crouched down to allow Serph to climb onto her back, and Cerberus stretched out now that his own load had been lessened.

"Lead the way," the huge hound growled. "Heat and I will take care of anyone who tries to waylay us; you focus on getting Serph to his people as quickly as possible."

"Acknowledged!"

Serph was mildly amused to realize that Zaphir had taken on a deferential tone; Lupa's commanding presence, able to rein in even the most insubordinate individuals, was still alive and well.

The pair of massive beasts shot off at incredible speed. Serph had already seen firsthand how fast Zaphir was; but now that Cerberus was more lightly burderend, Serph could see that he was even swifter.

Zaphir was putting all of her effort into staying in the lead, but Serph suspected that even if she hadn't been carrying someone on her back she would have been no match for the hound-monster. If Cerberus had not restrained himself, the Sphinx would have been left in the dust. Serph was pleased to see his new ally deliberately bringing up the rear, but he felt a tinge of pity for Zaphir.

They made contact with the enemy while still about a kilometer from the battlefield. Zaphir slid to a brief halt, nose wrinkling, and let out a roar. They had arrived at an area littered with ruined buildings-- the perfect spot for the enemy to lay an ambush. The Sphinx whipped up a whirlwind of grit and dust that blotted out the magenta Light Time sky, even as a dozen or so enemy troopers came rappelling from various openings in the concrete ruins that loomed overhead.

The soldiers' markings were indigo, the color of the Brutes. As soon as they saw the two beasts rushing their way, they began to call out.

"We've spotted the Embryon leader and one of his lieutenants, along with two High Atma!" shouted the first.

"We are engaging the enemy," another answered. "Troops, activate your Atma!"

"Keep going, Zaphis!" Cerberus roared. "We'll handle these guys. Don't worry about us!"

Zaphir didn't even stop to acknowledge the order. She launched into a powerful leap, Serph still clinging to her back as she soared out of the ambush zone. A moment later, the ground below was bathed in a sea of fire. Two or three of the Brutes, still in the process of transforming, burst into flames, thrashing and collapsing as they quickly expired.

Serph and the Sphinx landed atop one of the smaller buildings and took a look back. The raging flames dimmed, revealing the forms of Agni and Cerberus within-- two imposing figures in the midst of the battlefield, their bodies licked by wisps and tongues of flame.

"Go!" Cerberus bellowed. "We'll catch up." The Sphinx remained transfixed for a moment, then took off again, carrying Serph down the slanted framework of the collapsed building's far side.

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"Sir!" It was Argilla, the first to spot Serph's arrival. She had assumed the form of Prithvi, and both her long, whiplike arms were soaked in the blood of her fallen foes. "Good to see you, sir! But we have to hurry! Sera's in danger."

"Good job, Zaphir. Now, go track down Sera and keep her safe." Serph leapt from the Sphinx's back, and the creature coiled her haunches and sprang away.

Serph called up the command words, a flare of blue light marking his transformation into Varuna.

The moment he changed his shape the nearby Brutes, likewise in Atma form, turned their various eyes and ears toward him almost as one.

The voice of one of the enemies rose above the others. "Capture the Embryon leader along with the black-haired girl-- but be sure to take them alive! Colonel's orders."

Colonel?

That gave Serph a moment's pause-- but there were bigger things to worry about right now. A ferocious red-and-black humanoid form, wielding blades in both its hands, shrieked as it rushed at him. Its bare skin was carved in bizarre patterns, and its wide-open eyes were blank orbs of gold. On pure reflex, Varuna dealt a single quick stroke, slicing through his attacker's blades and cleaving their wielder in two.

A second and third opponent came at him the same way. He battered their weapons away, sending sharp steel spinning in a gleaming arc, and then he slashed crosswise, blood and flesh flying as he cut his opponents to ribbons. His tongue throbbed. He bit into a gobbet of flesh that had dropped into his hand and swallowed it in a gulp; the energy in the sweet meat suffused him.

"Surround him, and attack en masse!" boomed a voice from further back, presumably that of the enemy commander. Varuna crooned with delight. Tossing aside the uneaten bits of his previous foe, he conjured up a frigid vortex and spiraled into the air. The squad of demons who had attempted to surround him were enveloped in ice, and before they could shake the frost from their bodies, they were met with the blade that claimed their lives. Heads rolled. Blood gushed upwards, only to freeze into crystalline fountains of glimmering crimson that cam crashing down around the descending Varuna, shattering into tiny shards of ice.

The unseen commander let out a scream of rage-- a sound that made Varuna's cry of delight all the louder. Serph's Atma was caught up in a dance of death, set to the pounding rhythm of battle that echoed within his head; with each step, limbs were severed, bodies were rent in two, and foes were frozen solid and then shattered apart. And as Varuna continued his grim choreography of carnage, in the depths of the demon's consciousness was Serph, trying to find Sera. Where was she? He could feel her close by. *She was all right, still conscious. She was scared, but she wasn't hurt. She was--*

His field of vision opened up. There, amidst all the bloodshed and chaos, was a single bright and quiet spot of light on the battlefield. Within its inviolate glow was the form of a small young girl held securely against the bosom of a feminine Atma with radiant skin. The light surrounded

them like a shimmering dome, as if demarcating a patch of anointed ground into which none might enter; outside the ring were strewn the innumerable corpses of enemy Atma who had dared try to make their way inside. And yet still more approached, their bodies impaled by an invisible force as they, too, joined the ranks of the dead.

Serph recognized the pair at once: Jinana, the Maribel leader, in the form of her High Atma, Ushas, and Sera, the enigmatic child he had come to find.

"Jinana! It's me, Serph!"

"Serph?" The young girl lifted her head, and at once her eyes were filled with joy. "Serph! Is it really you? You came for me?"

"No!" Jinana interrupted her. "You mustn't look at this horror!" With one hand she gently cradled Sera's face back against her chest. Jinana glanced at the carnage around her before looking back at Serph, her face wreathed in light. "As you can see, Serph, they know about Sera." Her words were bitter and clipped. "They know about her blood, too. But it's not only her they're after-- they mean to capture you as well."

Serph was confounded. "Why me?" With the Wolves now defeated, the Brutes were the only tribe left to stand against the Embryon-led alliance. It would make sense for them to take out Serph if they feared that growing hegemony, but that should mean they'd want him dead, not taken prisoner.

"The bitch is right, you little brat!" A rough voice spat the words from behind Serph. An instant later, a sharp impact knocked him off balance. His quick reflexes allowed him to avoid the worst of the blow, and he quickly righted himself, spinning to face the new threat. A massive shadow loomed over him.

Mick the Slug, already in Atma form as Rahu, stood nearly twice as tall as Varuna. His mouth was split wide in a mocking grin. "I admit, you had us fooled, but we learned that box of yours was full of nothing but junk. Lost face *big time* over that. So now I gotta bring back that little black-haired girlie-- with her *real* blood. *And* I gotta bring you back alive, or it's my head."

"Sera I can understand, but why do the Brutes want me?"

"You think I give a shit?" Rahu raised his pointed, angular arms, conjuring a vortex of spinning air between his scissor-like hands, and called down a mighty whirlwind. Varuna let out a growl and stepped nimbly to one side, the blast of wind gouging a deep hole in the ground where he'd been standing.

Jinana, still protectively embracing Sera, fanned out Ushas's hair, launching several strands like piercing spears at Rahu as he tried to deliver a follow-up attack. They struck his mighty form in the shoulder, throwing off his aim and sending the second whirlwind straying into a wrecked vehicle, pulverizing it with terrifying ease.

Rahu seemed unperturbed. He plucked the spears out of his shoulder as if they were no more than thorns. "Didn't you hear the news? Varin Omega's gone off his gourd. Suddenly started demanding that everyone called him 'Colonel.' He can't keep himself together, keeps lashing out at his own people left and right. It's a real pain in the ass."

"You expect us to sympathize?" Argilla appeared at Serph's side in her Atma form of Prithvi. "We're not letting you have Sera, you fat creep!" She created a localized gravity well at Rahu's massive feet. He lurched forward, wheeling his arms as the ground swallowed him up to his waist. The ruins nearby began to warp and then collapse, further twisting as they were drawn inwards. With their foe unable to move, the Embryon launched a focus onslaught-- Prithvi's whiplike arms, Ushas's hair, and Varuna's blades.

Rahu grinned wide. "Bat! Do it now!"

By the time Serph realized what was happening, it was too late. Ushas had made a hole in her defensive barrier in order to attack Rahu, and suddenly a black shadow, moving too quickly for the naked eye, swept in through the opening, knocking her over and yanking the girl from her grasp. Sera's scream receded into the sky.

"Bat!" The shadow darted high overhead as Ushas howled its name in rage. She sprang to her feet, firing a volley of crescent-shaped blades of light after the intruder, then whipped her head to bunble her hair together, ready to launch it as a deadly lance at her former lieutenant.

Camazotz's peals of triumphant laughter echoed over the landscape. "Nobody move! Anyone takes so much as a step, I rip the girl's face off!"

Serph and his allies froze. Camazotz clutched one of Sera's arm in each foot; she hung beneath him as if crucified, desperate and utterly helpless.

Rahu grunted as he scrabbled his way free of his hole. "Took you long enough, Bat. You had me worried there for a minute."

"Don't presume to order me around," Camazotz sneared. "I made my move when I was good and ready."

Camazotz hovered in the air, beating his massive black wings as he scanned the crowd below. He clicked his tongue in disappointment. "Aw, is the red one not with you? What a shame! Here I was hoping to rip him apart first."

"Give Sera back, you *traitor*!" Argilla screamed.

"You think I'm going to put her down because you asked?" Camazotz snickered. "No, I'm afraid we're going to keep her. And we're going to need your leader, as well. Maybe the big guy wants to devour the kid himself, piece by sweet, bloody piece."

"I've never even *met* Varin Omega," Serph said, holding in his anger. The closest he had come to the Brutes' commander was glimpsing his shadow from behind a screen back at the Temple.

"I imagine not," Camazotz replied. He managed an approximation of a shrug as he continued to flap his wings. "I don't pretend to understand his logic. Ever since that strange fellow from the Church showed up, he's been acting weirder and weirder. Keeps muttering nonsense about how someone killed him-- how this world is hell and we're all already dead."

"Someone from the Church?" Serph's mind raced with possibilities. "Is that who told you about Sera?"

Rahu clicked his tongue reproachfully. "Oh dear, oh dear, you've said too much," he mocked.

Rahu gave a signal to the few remaining Brutes, snorting when he saw how few were left. "This is really all of you? After fighting against a mere handful of opponents? So much for

calling yourselves 'Brutes'." Grumbles of discontent rose from amongst the survivors; members of the top-ranked tribe in the Junkyard, they clearly did not appreciate being mocked by allies who had abandoned their own tribes.

"Cast off your Atma and come along quietly, Serph of the Embryon. You know what will happen if you don't."

"No, Serph, you can't! Don't do it!" Sera cried out. "You can't go with them!"

Without a word, Serph reversed his transformation; Varuna disappeared, replaced by the form of the silver-haired young man.

Argilla cried out. "Sir!"

"Serph, are you out of your mind?" Jinana added.

"Right now, I don't see that we have any other choice," Serph said, gritting his teeth. "I have no intention of letting us all get killed here. I'll find some way to escape with Sera."

Rahu brought his scissor-clawed hands together in satisfaction. "Smart boy," he said. "As a reward, I'll let you watch your tribe be destroyed before your own eyes-- I still hunger, after all, and those two lovely ladies there are looking mighty tasty. I have to say, I've wanted to taste a piece of Jinana for a while now."

The hair atop of Ushas' head writhed in anger and indignation.

"Whoa, hey now," Rahu growled. "We haven't forgotten the 'nobody move' part of the deal, have we? You'll have plenty of time to see what my glorious Atma is capable of while you die. I promise you won't be bored-- oh no. You're gonna get to watch as I eat you up, one bite at a time."

His eyes then fell on the transmitter set in Serph's ear. "Oh, is that a comm link? Perfect! Why don't you use it to call the rest of the fools from your base over here? Hell, even just that wily little bishop of yours. I think it'd be fun to make you watch while I pay him back for all the grief and misery he's caused me."

Serph clenched his hands into tight fists.

"You bastard," Argilla spat, trembling with rage.

Rahu merely let out an unsettling guffaw.

"Serph, don't!" Sera cried as she continued her useless struggling. "Argilla, Jinana, don't let him go through with this!"

"Quiet, you little bitch," Camazotz said, bringing one of his claws threateningly close to Sera's eyes. "Nobody said anything about bringing you back *unharmed*. Do you really want me to rip your face off? Or maybe I could pluck out one of these pretty little eyes?" Sera kept her gaze fixed on the claw as it hovered menacingly before her face.

Tears still pooled in her eyes, but she wasn't crying any longer. "Let me go," she said quietly.

"Hmm?" Camazotz's massive ears twitched as he peered into the girl's face. "What'd you just say? You think you're in a position to give me any lip, girl?"

"Let. Me. Go."

For an instant, Sera's jet-black eyes flashed with color.

Serph felt as if someone had jabbed slender fingers right into his skull. He staggered. For a moment the scene before him distorted strangely, as if blurred by a burst of harsh static. Camazotz wavered as if he'd been struck, and his feet, still clutching Sera, warped and shifted. She fell from his grasp, but her descent was slow and languid, as if she were falling through oil, her slender frame sinking gradually toward the ground. She fell limply, as if she had passed out.

"Bat, you idiot!" Rahu called out. "What are you doing?"

"Huh? What-- But, I..." Bat was flustered, clearly not comprehending what had just happened. Serph sprang into motion as Sera began to fall; in an instant, he changed back into Varuna and leapt forward with all his might, heading for where the girl was going to hit the ground.

"Oh no you don't!" Bat shrieked as he came back to his senses. Down he swooped, quickly gaining on the falling girl.

"You leave Sera alone, you creep!"

A split-second before Bat could reach her, a blast of purple lightning shot across the sky and engulfed him. Camazotz let out a screech, spiraling off to one side and only barely managing to right himself. It was all he could do to keep from plummeting to the ground; holes were torn in his wings and smoke spiraled up from his sides where the lightning had passed through him. "Who did that?" he cried. "Who *dares*?"

Serph was still racing, reaching out to catch Sera as she fell, but he wasn't going to make it in time. Just as he was certain she was going to smash into the ground, a blur of steely-black fur cut across his path from one side. There was a soft thud, followed by a tiny groan. *Sera's voice*.

"Looks like I made it." The great gunmetal beast, Cerberus, turned one of its smaller heads to Serph, a tiny lick of flame showing through its fanged smile. "And right in the nick of time, too, by the look of it. Is everyone okay?"

Serph was flushed with relief. "Lupa!"

In the canine creature's wake, a spiral of roaring flames descended upon the battlefield, incinerating a number of Brutes before they even had a chance to scream. Rising out of the fire, bathed in flames and radiating murderous intent, was the proud, crimson form of Agni. He gave a dismissive shake of both his heads, then let out a feral laugh of delight. "So this is where all the fun's been hiding! And there's still some food left, too."

"*There* you are, you red-headed son of a bitch!" roared the wounded Camazotz/

"Well, well-- if it isn't my escaped prey," Agni said, baring rows of gleaming teeth. "Just who I was hoping to see. This time there won't even be bones left when I'm finished devouring you."

The only response was a maddended shriek. A series of invisible, rapid-fire shockwaves sped from Camazotz's gaping maw; all of them, however, were dissipated by the oncoming rush of Agni's fireball, vanishing in a flurry of sparks and a gout of twisting flame.

Camazotz still had his jaws open wide in an attempt to launch a follow-up attack when another of Agni's fireballs struck true. It seared the inside of his mouth, turning the would-be shockwave into a muffled groan. The bat-like Atma flapped his ruined wings in an attempt to retreat higher into the sky, but he couldn't gain the necessary altitude. He managed to knock aside another fireball with his wings, but torn up as they were, they offered incomplete protection. As each

searing blast struck home, he dropped closer to the ground, despite his desperate attempts to flap his way back up.

"You're not getting away!" Agni crouched low and then launched himself in a great leap, improbably fast for his massive form. Unprepared for the sudden assault, Camazotz let out a cry as one of Agni's four-clawed hands grasped him by the wing; at the same time, spirals of intense flame gushed forth from Agni's powerful arms. The scent of searing flesh filled the air, and dark smoke rose upwards. Camazotz wailed, tearing away more than half of his wing as he wrenched himself free of Agni.

"You bastard!" he snapped as he wobbled unsteadily through the air. The membrane of his wings were torn so full of holes that they were of little use for flying anymore-- and they likely would be equally worthless for defense.

"Oh, this isn't good," Rahu murmured to himself. "The two of us alone aren't gonna be able to stand up to this many High Atma at once, and the troops we were loaned are no help at all. Looks like discretion's the better part of valor."

Rahu disappeared in a shimmer of blue light, and in his place stood the massive, dark-skinned form of Mick the Slug-- massive, that was, compared to anyone but Rahu. He waddled furtively amidst the ruins that made up the battlefield, searching for an escape route. His driving motive, it seemed, had not changed: it didn't matter who else died so long as he kept himself alive.

"You're not getting away that easily, fatso!" Argilla's voice dripped with rage. "You don't get to escape all on your own again. We're going to make you pay for the way you made Jinana suffer, and for what you did to Sera, and for all your other crimes."

Both Argilla as Prithvi and Jinana as Ushas had now fixed their gazes on their retreating foe.

"She's right," Ushas added in a similarly cold tone. "And even if you try to call upon Rahu, you won't be able to take on both of us at once. Give it up, Mick, and come with us. I think all the people who died for you are waiting at the bottom of the chasm of karma at the Temple, waiting to rip you apart."

"Whoa!" Mick covered his head as the rubble around him began to collapse. He tried to force a smile. "Whoa, hey now, easy there. Let's not get hasty." He continued slowly backing away.

As if unable to stand even the sound of his voice, Prithvi held up both of her hands. A dark orb of pure gravity welled up between her cupped palms. As the darkness pooled between Prithvi's hands, Ushas's entire body began to glow with light; starting at her feet and legs, the intensifying light swiftly made its way up past her waist, chest, shoulders, and head, collecting at last within her golden hair in a radiant blaze too bright to look upon.

In a panic, Mick tripped over backwards as he tried to get away, and then began to scamper along the ground on all fours. The growing black orb of gravity and the brilliant spear of light were poised to come hurtling towards him-- but just before the two Atma released them, a voice cried out.

"This is the end of you, evildoer!"

A massive bolt of lightning struck the ground right in front of Mick, knocking him backwards. Even Prithvi and Ushas were staggered by the impact; their timing disrupted, they fired off their attacks in the wrong direction, annihilating the skeleton of a ruined building in the distance.

"What in the world was that?" Argilla asked.

Did Mick have backup? A load of new troops from the Brutes? No-- the voice had been familiar...

"Lightning? Where the hell's it coming from?" Mick stammered as he continued to crawl along. Falling bits of rock and grit pelted his broad back. Then a sound not unlike oil sizzling in a pan filled the air; he look around fearfully.

"Still alive, huh? Then take this!"

There was no time for Mick to react before the next attack came; a searing blast struck him from above, and he let out a high-pitched scream as he was flattened to the ground. His thin braids of hair sizzled and smoldered, and holes melted in his tribal combat suit. "Woah, ow, hey! What gives? What's going on?"

"You guys tried to hurt Sera! You're gonna pay for that-- with more of *this*!" Another volley of lightning bolts rained down upon Mick, and he covered his head once more as he scuttled ridiculously along the ground.

"What the heck?" Prithvi called out. "What *is* all this?" The rain of electricity was growing more and more intense. She and Ushas remained rooted in place; one wrong step and they too might have been struck by the indiscriminately scattered bolts of lightning.

"Argilla," Ushas cried as electricity continued to split the air around her. "Mick's gone."

Indeed, their enemy's huge, dark form had somehow managed to disappear from the battlefield amidst the electrical barrage. Prithvi screamed in anger, launching gravity orbs every which way; but while she succeeded in pulverizing several nearby ruined structures, she did not flush out Mick from hiding. Ushas's hair turned into seeking tendrils, groping about the area, but her prey was not to be found. Camazotz, meanwhile, continued to flee from Agni, darting through the chaotic web of electricity that cut through the air.

Suddenly a bright, blue-winged Atma swooped in a wide arc overhead, standing out against the dark magenta sky. Each time it cried out, pale blue electrical energy coursed over its body and then struck out at the Brutes on the ground below. "Sera is my friend. You mess with her, you mess with me!"

"I recognize that voice-- it can't be! He's supposed to be back at headquarters!" Argilla's anger-fueled exclamation echoed over the battlefield. By now, the surviving Brutes were making a run for it, all of them harried by the increasing barrage of lightning strikes.

"Cielo?" Serph sighed. "Oh, *what* is he doing?"

The newcomer had driven off all the enemies that had tried to come after Sera, it was true; but he'd been under strict orders to stay back at the Embryon base in order to rest. Serph realized now that he had heard his voice chime in earlier, right as that purple-tinged lightning had struck Camazotz, keeping him from nabbing Sera again.

The crashing thunder of Cielo's attacks had roused Sera back to consciousness. She clung uneasily to Cerberus's back, awestruck at the sight of the huge beast. "Oh, I, um..."

"Sorry to startle you," Cerberus said with a wry chuckle. "Don't worry; I'm not your enemy. I'll let Serph handle the introductions later. Serph, can you take her?"

"Of course," Serph said as he went to help Sera off Cerberus's back. "But... what are you doing here? How did you manage to find us?"

"You can thank your little gung-ho friend up there," Cerberus siad motioning skyward with his muzzle. "He spotted us from the air, and then led us here. Is he a member of the Embryon?"

"Yeah, he's one of us, all right."

"Sera, where are you? I've come to save you!" Cielo, in the form of Dyaus, appeared to be enjoying himself as he gleefully chased after the fleeing Brutes.

"Cielo!" Sera was the first to come running up to the young warrior as he came to a triumphant landing in the aftermath of the battle. She pitched forward to embrace him as he came out of his transformation.

He stumbled a bit, but soon managed to hug her back just as strongly. "Whoa-ho, hey now! Isn't this a nice little side benefit!"

"You saved me." Sera looked up at him, tears blurring her eyes. "But... weren't you injured? You're not in any pain, are you?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine! See? I'm in tip-top shape," Cielo said with an energetic wave of both hands. "Like I said before, seeing your smiling face was all it took to make me forget all about any pesky injuries. Besides, I was *so* bored back there, so it was good to have a bit of fun.

"And boy, do I feel-- ow!" he added, reacting to a slap on the back of the head. He spun around, pouting. "Hey, what gives, Argilla? I totally helped out-- I'm the hero of the day, here!"

"Shut up. And don't you dare call yourself a 'hero', you idiot." Argilla hit Cielo several more times as she verbally tore into him. "How many times did I tell you to just sit tight, stop complaining, and stay in bed? Do you mind telling me what the hell you're doing here, pulling a stunt like this? I swear, I'd accuse you of having rocks for brains, but that'd imply you had any brains at all."

"Oh, Argilla, please don't be so angry. Cielo's the one who saved me!"

"I know that, Sera. That's not the issue here." Argilla glared at Cielo, raising her fist again. "Thanks to you blasting that lightning everywhere willy-nilly, we lost track of Bat and Mick. We captured fome of their men, but those two got away. It's like once you get caught up in the moment you stop being able to see the big picture."

"He's always been a blockhead," Heat chimed in as he strolled up next to her. In the wake of the fierce battle, he had the sensual look of a satisfied predator after a successful hunt. "He's never been able to hold more than a single thought inside that head of his at a time. I'm a little annoyed that my rightful prey escaped my clutches yet again."

Cielo, tears in his eyes, held up his arms to ward off any further punches. He had no reply.

"Moreover, you had orders to remain at base," Argilla snapped, still furious. "Strict orders to stay confined to bed until your injuries had fully healed-- orders from our leader, no less. What happened to that, huh?"

"Ah, right, that." Cielo mumbled. He gazed into the distance for a moment, then put on a nice, big, plaintive grin. "I was, ah, kinda thinking we could just let that slide."

"Think again." Serph joined them, having finished giving instructions after the battle. "Honestly, Cielo, what did you think you were doing?"

Serph had spoken to Gale by comm link-- the bishop had called in reinforcements from the home base after detecting the incoming attack, but Serph, Heat, and the others had managed to clear up the situation before those troops had arrived. He had also put Jinana and Lupa in charge of overseeing the aid of the wounded, as well as rounding up the surviving Brutes and processing the prisoners. Initially Jinana seemed suspicious of Lupa, never having met him before, but she appeared to appreciate the brisk and authoritative way he issued commands, and soon the two were working smoothly in sync with one another.

"How did you even know where this battle was taking place?" Serph asked. "Argilla, you didn't tell Cielo where you were going, did you?"

"Of course not, sir. I knew that if I did, he'd get all worked up and then make a big fuss about wanting to come with us. I didn't even tell him we were heading out."

Cielo frowned. "Aw, you're so mean! What gives?"

"You stay quiet," Argilla said, delivering another quick jab.

Cielo rubbed his head and then pouted some more. "Look, there was this cat, okay?"

"A cat?"

"Yeah, a cat. Oh, hey, Sera, I saw a cat, too!" He looked over at Sera, eyes wide and face beaming. "He was so cute! And all soft and fluffy and slinky."

"Cielo, hold on, slow down," Serph said. "What does this cat have to do with how you managed to get here?"

"All right, so, I was just lying in bed-- by myself, not leaving my room, as ordered." Annoyance had crept into Cielo's voice. "And just when I was thinking 'bout how I was bored out of my skull, this cat came out from under my bed."

"A cat."

"A cat, yeah. He was black, with a long tail, and big, pointy ears, and long whiskers." Cielo brought his hands up to his head, mimicking the cat's features as he spoke. "So we played around for a little bit, but then suddenly he started meowing and clawing at the door, and so I thought, okay, he wants to get out, so I opened the door. and when I did, I heard people all bustling around, like something urgent was going on, and I started wondering what the deal was with that when I heard someone say something about how the team had gone to move Sera had been attacked."

Serph and Argilla looked at each other. "And so then you left the room, too," Argilla said.

Cielo nodded, and then went on. "I had no idea where to do, though, and I knew that if someone else spotted me they'd just drag me back to my room, and so while I was trying to figure out what I should do, the cat padded up to my feet and looked up at me, like it wanted to tell me something."

"The cat did?"

"Yeah, the cat," Cielo said with another nod. Then he noticed the many dubious looks that were upon him. "Oh, come on!" he shouted. "It's true! I swear! He made a face that was all 'come with me', and then he started to pitter-patter along to lead the way." The intensity of his voice betrayed his desperation to be believed. "So I followed him, and we made it outside without anyone seeing us. Then I noticed that the sky over towards Manipura had gone all red, so in a panic I transformed and flew right here, and I saw Heat and Lupa and--"

"Okay, Cielo, I get it," Serph said. "I believe you."

"You do? Awesome!"

"Sir, hold on," Argilla said, turning to Serph with a furrowed brow. "You can't seriously believe a story like that, can you? I mean, I've heard about animals called 'cats' from Sera, but I'm pretty sure they can't do the sorts of things Cielo just said."

"I have to believe him. I've seen this cat a few times, myself."

"Really?" The wrinkles between Argilla's eyebrows deepened.

"Yes, really. Nothing as striking as what Cielo just mentioned, but he's turned up a few times, I think to help me when I was in danger. I'm not sure what this creature really is or what his intentions are, but I think he may be one of the few allies we've had since all this mess with our Atma started."

Cielo clapped his hands together. "Oh, hey, that's right! I just remembered-- about the cat, I mean. His eyes were the same color as yours, buddy!"

Heat raised an eyebrow. "His eyes?"

"Yeah, he had the most amazing silver eyes, just like the boss does!" Cielo stared intently into Serph's face and then murmured a little 'yeah' under his breath. "Like, exactly the same; I can tell by lookin' at them now. That's why I went along with him-- because he reminded me of you."

Argilla muttered to herself. "I've got to wonder. You've never been the sharpest tool in the shed."

Another unknown to add to the list, Serph thought. *The invisible Atma, the mysterious black ooze, and now this cat*. Thankfully, it didn't seem hostile towards them, but who knew when that might change? Nothing was too strange for the Junkyard, nowadays.

There was also the matter of the Brutes' leader and his erratic behavior to consider. The Embryon had built up an impressive fighting force, and it was reasonable to expect the Brutes to feel intimidated enough that they'd make Serph a target. But why order the troops to take him alive? Eliminating Serph-- *killing* him-- was the only way to destroy the Embryon.

Serph hoped he would learn more about all of these enigmas when the new prisoners were interrogated.

Later that day, after Gale had arrived with the reinforcements and the initial post-battle responsibilities had been taken care of, Serph called a quick meeting with his lieutenants, along with Jinana and Lupa.

"Good work, Gale," Serph began. "And you two, as well; sorry to have gotten you caught up in all this."

"Think nothing of it," Jinana said. "This attack happened during a joint operation, and helping keep the girl safe is as much the Maribel's responsibility now as your own. Besides, this was all the fault of that traitor Bat." Jinana paused. "By the way, you still haven't told me just who this is." She indicated the man who now stood next to her.

"Oh, pardon me. My name is--"

"This is Lupa, the leader of the Wolves," Serph interjected quickly. Lupa stared at him, and Jinana raised an eyebrow. Argilla opened her mouth, ready to object, but stopped herself. The only one unfazed by the announcement was Heat, who simply stood with his arms folded as he often did, the corner of his mouth curling up ever so slightly.

"Serph, hang on, I'm--"

"With the death of the Wolves' previous leader, commanding authority over the tribe passed on to him," Serph said, his tone firm, holding up a hand to curtail Lupa's attempt to correct him. "I'm not sure how the Church systems are going to handle it, but Canis Volk is dead. Currently, Lupa is effectively in charge of the surviving Wolves; I see no issue in acknowledging his position as leader."

"Very well." Jinana nodded. "Lately, acknowledgement from the Church *has* become rather meaningless. If one has the ability, and the wherewithal to use it to keep the members of the tribe under control, then that person is a leader. I apologize for my earlier rudeness, Lupa of the Wolves."

Lupa seemed to be struggling to know what to say.

Gale stepped in, his voice raised-- a rare thing for him. "Sir, what can you possibly be thinking in this? I do not comprehend."

"I don't need you to comprehend; I just need you to accept that Lupa is the leader of the Wolves, and that he stands on equal footing with Jinana and me. Oh, and also--" Serph removed the comm link from his ear and tossed it back to Gale--"later on, you can explain to me how Cielo managed to escape our home base, *bishop*. I'm sure you realize that this amounts to negligence on your part regarding tribe supervision."

Another rare occurrence: Gale was at a loss for words. Serph gazed up at the sky, an empty feeling in his chest. Light Time was about to transition into Shade Time, and specks of green light began to twinkle beyond the ever-falling droplets of silver rain.

It took two days to deal with the aftermath of the attempted kidnapping.

The initial plan had been to move Sera to a location near the Maribel base, but now that it had been discovered, that site was no longer usable. After holding a conference, the next location the alliance chose was the Solids' former base in Anahata, which was still relatively undamaged.

The Embryon headquarters in Muladhara had long since been stretched to its limits, as had the Maribel's. The Solid's base was, as the tribe's name suggested, designed with defense as a prime consideration, and even after the joint attack by the other two tribes, it was still in generally good condition. It was decided that this fortress would serve as the headquarters for the three-tribe alliance, as well.

The Wolves brought only a dozen or so members to the table, so they didn't bolster the Embryon and Maribel very much in terms of sheer numbers, but with the mighty Cerberus added to the alliance, the three tribes now boasted a total of seven High Atma, making for a formidable fighting force indeed.

Sera was to be set up in the new basem which the alliance had dubbed the Citadel, squirreled away in its innermost depths. Argilla took up residence in the adjacent room, with the other senior lieutenants and tribe leaders all claiming other quarters in the surrounding area. If any attack force managed to get to the girl at her new location, the alliance was likely already doomed.

The base was searched nook and cranny for traps and secret passageways; all those that were discovered were either sealed off or placed under heavy observation.

The fact that Anahata, where the Citadel lay, shared a border with Ajna-- the territory of the Brutes, the only remaining rival tribe of significance-- was cause for some concern, but Gale was of the opinion that this fact made it easier to keep an eye on enemy's activities.

The need to draw more blood form Sera had gradually declined. Argilla and Jinana had both stopped partaking of the girl's blood, and while blood capsules to be used as countermeasure against going berserk were still standard equipment for most tribe members, these saw hardly any use. The experimental bullets filled with her blood also had been deemed a failure, and were no longer being made.

As the fighting over her grew more intense, Sera had become despondent; but after the others explained to her that, more than anything else, it was her being there and being happy that was keeping them all safe, she began to come around, resolving to take heart in that fact.

She seemed almost cheerful when she was shown to her new room in the Citadel. Taking a careful look around, she gave the bed a little pat, then turned to look back at Serph, her eyes bright. "I guess as of today, this base is our new home."

"'Home?'"

It was another unfamiliar word. Sera muttered a quick apology, blushing as she went on to explain. "It's a place where a 'family' lives together. A place where they can have fun and talk to each other, a place to rest, where they can always come back to. It's where you're the most comfortable, where people feel like they belong, where they can relax-- a bastion for those who live there. Is this going to be that kind of place, Serph?"

"If what you mean is anything like a hub where troops set out from and where they return after missions to rest and resupply, then I suppose so, yes. --What's a 'family'? What do you mean by that?"

Sera fumbled for words to convey the idea.

"Look, it's like... they're the people who are the closest to you... who you can always depend on, and who you feel a strong bond with even when they're far away. Sort of like 'friends', which I mentioned before, but not quite the same."

"I'm not sure I get it," Serph said. Sera was sitting on the bed, looking up at him apologetically, so he tousled her hair affectionately. "From what I've heard, though, this 'home' thing of yours doesn't sound so bad. Neither does 'family'. I think it's a good thing that you think of us and this place like that. I know there's a lot going on, but I promise we'll keep you safe. You can relax. No one is going to hand you over to the Brutes or to the Church."

"I'll be all right. Because this is our home." And then she smiled at him, so bright that for a moment he felt as if he were bathed in light. Serph left the room filled with a strange sense of warmth as he headed down to oversee some repairs to the fortress walls.

Within a few days, the three- tribe union had finished moving into its new headquarters. Now the Embryon, the Maribel, and the Wolves (with Lupa as provisional leader) were an alliance in reality as well as in name.

When the move-in had been completed during ST-- *no, during the* 'evening', Serph told himself; *that was a better word,* evening-- the Embryon leader decided to take a breather and look in on Cielo, who'd been placed under house arrest. Even though Mick and Bat had managed to escape, it was thanks to Cielo that the alliance had been able to rescue Sera. Nevertheless, in Gale's judgement, the impetuous youngster still needed to be punished for having joined in on the attack in direct defiance of his leader's orders. Serph felt somewhat bad for the kid, though, so he wanted to see how he was doing, and possibly end his confinement if it looked like he'd been through enough already.

When Serph got to Cielo's room, however, it was empty. There was, however, a sole tribe member who appeared to have been acting as guard, standing outside the door with a sheepish expression on his face.

"What's going on?" Serph asked. "Where's Cielo? Did he escape again?"

"Well, sir, you see," the guard said, the look in his eyes protesting his innocence, "Argilla came by, saying something about how she needed to 'borrow him', and then she dragged him off with her."

That was strange. Since when did Argilla ever need anything from Cielo?

Recently, Argilla had been spending most of her time with Sera, and not just to stand guard over her; the two seemed to enjoy each other's company. Sera generally seemed very happy. But Serph knew that it was mere days since the girl had been attacked by Camazotz, dangled high above a blood-soaked battlefield, and nearly dropped to her death; she put on a brave face, but he

could only assume she was dealing with some major shock or trauma. He hoped that Argilla's company was helping her recover.

And then there was Cielo... Sera was closer with the young soldier than she was with anyone else; had Argilla simply wanted her to have someone else to talk to?

Serph pondered that as he made his way toward Sera's quarters.

As he rounded the last corner in the corridor, he was surprised to hear a mingled cacophony of two women laughing cheerfully, Sera's voice chattering, and then Cielo's exclamation, sounding on the verge of tears. Underneath it all was the clamor of what sounded like someone running around, bumping into things and shoving furniture.

"Cielo? Argilla? What in the world is--"

"Boss, you gotta help me!" The instant Serph opened the door, Cielo crashed into him like a rocket.

Serph was flabbergasted. "What's all this racket? And Jinana's here, too? What the heck is going on?"

"Oh, sir," Argilla said, quickly composing herself. Jinana did likewise, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Um, hey, Serph," Sera said, seated on the bed further in. Her wide eyes went even wider, and she lifted a hand to hide her laugh.

The four had been arranged around a table that was piled with various items of an unclear purpose-- Serph knew what they were normally used for, but he had no idea why they had been brought in here. There were pots of face paint, along with brushes, marking pens, and other applicators: materials used for applying tribal colors. There was Embryon orange, of course, along with Maribel red and Wolves white; but also green and blue, as well as black and brown and yellow used for painting vehicles. There was nothing, however, that would be needed to paint the interior of a room.

"Sera's been teaching us about 'makeup'," Argilla explained proudly.

"It involves women painting up their faces in order to look more agreeable," Jinana chimed in. "Originally, the two of us were going to try our hand with Sera, but then we worried about what might happen if we messed up, so we decided to experiment on the young one here, instead." She gestured cheerfully at Cielo. "Come here. We haven't finished doing your eyebrows. This would all go much easier if you would hold still."

"Remember, Cielo," Argilla said, "you're under disciplinary action for disobeying a direct order. If you let us do this, it'll earn you some leniency. Now be quiet and do as you're told, all right?"

"This isn't disciplinary action! This is bullying!' Cielo looked up, tears in his eyes, and Serph had to stifle his reflexive gasp.

In addition to the boy's entire face having been dusted with some kind of white powder, both his cheeks had been slathered with a thick coating of orange paint, and for some reason, several green lines arched out from above his eyes. The ladies had attempted to paint his lips red, but the contours stuck out too far, making it look like his mouth extended down to his chin. The edges of

his eyes had been lined with a black pen. And then there were the aforementioned problematic eyebrows, which were so wavy and uneven they looked like the women had painted them using their off hands. The only saving grace was that they had at least chosen a blue that matched Cielo's hair.

"Sera, what's all this about?"

"Um, I'm sorry," Sera replied, looking small and uncertain. "I tried to stop them, but Argilla and Jinana seemed so happy, and..."

"It really is a lot of fun," Argilla said. "You should give it a try, sir."

"Indeed," Jinana added. "I'm surprised the idea never occured to me before." She and Argilla both smiled as they dipped slender brushes into a can of yellow paint, swirling them around as they prepped for their next styling attempt. She crooked a ginger at Cielo.

"No way, nuh-uh! Why's it gotta be me, anyhow? I mean, why not Sera?" the teary-eyed soldier protested, pointing at the girl. "Or what about you two ladies? Why not practice on each other's faces?"

Argilla and Jinana looked at one another, then turned back toward Cielo and said, in unison, "But what if we messed up?"

"No! No more of this! I can't take it!" Cielo bawled, clutching at Serph's arm.

"You know, Argilla," Serph sighed, phrasing his words carefully, "I know that Cielo is under disciplinary action right now, but *this* is something else. I think he's been through enough, and it's time to let him off the hook."

"Hmm. In that case, why not take his place as our test subject, Serph of the Embryon?" Jinana said, a fiendish little gleam in her eye. She swirled her paintbrush more emphatically. "That face of yours would make a fine palette. We all have to find ways of bettering ourselves, and I'm sure we'll do a better job on our second try. Practice makes perfect, after all. It's no different than learning how to shoot a gun."

"I, ah, well..."

When Serph trailed off, Cielo gazed up at him, worried, clinging to him more tightly now. "Boss, please."

"Argilla?"

"Yes, sir?"

"As you were."

"Roger that, sir."

"No! *No!* I thought you were my buddy! But you're a no-good traitor! You're a *devil* is what you are!"

Gleeful laughter filled the air as Cielo was snatched up by two eager pairs of hands, his futile protests continuing as they dragged him, struggling, back into the room.

I'll have to tell Gale to take him off probation later, Serph thought.

Serph felt a sense of relief as he left Cielo's wailing behind him, mixed with a sense of guilt. He sighed. If it had just been Argilla, he could have ordered her to stop, but with Jinana there as well, his hands were effectively tied.

He took one look back before heading up toward the roof of the edifice that had become his new headquarters. There were dozens of tribe members milling about, many working on areas that required maintenance and reconstruction, others building new lookout stations to keep eyes on their new neighbors, the Brutes. He returned the salutes of the personnel who snapped to attention as he passed, eventually making his way to the wide gun platform he'd come to on his first visit-- as an infiltrator-- back when this had been enemy territory.

There wasn't much in the way of damage up here. The overly large cannon had been removed, and in its place were materials for helping to convert the former battery into a platform where flying Atma could easily take off and land. Serph sat down on a steel beam and let out another soft sigh.

A hand clapped down on his shoulder from out of nowhere. "Hey there."

Serph looked up to see a familiar, brown-skinned face smiling down at him. "The leader taking it upon himself to patrol the roofs? That's dedication. I was just looking for you, actually. Mind if I sit down?"

Lupa took a seat on the beam without waiting for Serph to answer. He stretched out a litte, the mannerism somehow reminiscent of the great hound Cerberus. He cracked his neck a few times, then looked back at Serph. "What was all that fuss I heard going on back there?" He gestured in the direction of Sera's room with his thumb. "I thought I heard Jinana's voice in there, and Cielo, too."

Serph wasn't sure how to respond, but he did his best to explain. Lupa burst into heavy laughter.

"Some leader you are, abandoning your man when he's been pinned down by the enemy! That poor kid's done for without your help."

"Easy for you to say; you weren't there to see it like I was," Serph muttered. "I'd like to see what you would have done with Argilla and Jinana slinking their way up to you, licking their lips and brandishing their brushes. I'd rather have to face off against their Atma."

"Heh. You may have a point, there."

There was a brief pause.

"Hey, Serph?" The smile was gone from Lupa's face, replaced now with a penetrating look. "You introduced me to Jinana as the leader of the Wolves. Were you serious about that?"

Serph had known this was a conversation that would come up eventually. "I was," he replied. He returned Lupa's steady stare. "Oh, and speaking of which... I was waiting for the chance to give this back to you. Here, take it." He reached into his pocket, pulled something out, and tossed it to Lupa.

Lupa held the dull silver tag ring in the palm of his hand, staring at it in silence for several moments.

"I went and got it back from Gale," Serph continued. "I'm not sure how much official bearing it'll have in reality, but that shows you're the leader of the Wolves. I want you to have it."

Again, Lupa was silent. The sound of ongoing construction filled the air.

"That bishop of yours is right," he said at last. "It's really impossible to figure out what you're thinking."

"Do you not want it?" Serph said, his tone turning sharp. "The fact of the matter is that there's no one else qualified to lead the surviving Wolves. And you've certainly been leading them so far. Why not make it official? Jinana recognizes your authority, too-- and at this point it seems like none of us needs to be concerned with whether or not the Church does."

"It's not about what I want; I'm asking if *you're* okay with this." Lupa was firm and insistent. "You dealt the killing blow to Canis Volk, and a tribe whose leader is killed is absorbed by the winning tribe. I was under the impression that the Wolves were considered vanquished at the hands of the Embryon. Why would you want the Wolves to live on?"

"Are you referring to the fact that 'the doors to paradise will be opened only to whoever controls the Junkyard'?" Serph stood up and stepped up to the edge of the cleaned-out gun platform. "It isn't like you to worry about something like that, Lupa. Since when has the paradise offered by the Church ever meant anything to you?"

"I don't give a damn about Nirvana," Lupa spat. "None of that matters at this point. Paradise, the Church, tribe hierarchies-- none of that matters to me. I just..."

"You're not the one who took out your former leader, so you're hesitant to take on his mantle?" Serph asked quietly.

"There is that, yes," Lupa said. He took a deep breath, and was quiet for another moment or so. "It feels wrong for me to continue on in his name when, in the end, I had to abandon my tribe instead of staying to defend it. If I were going to take over as leader, then I'd want to earn that honor fair and square, by fighting for it. For the leader of an allied tribe to just up and hand this thing to me as proof that I'm sort of leader, well... it might as well be a piece of trash."

"Trash, huh? Now *that* sounds like the Lupa I know." Serph couldn't help but smile. "So, what are you going to do, then? I've already given you the ring, and I have no intention of taking it back. Shall we spar as Varuna and Cerberus, and the losing party has to accept whatever the winner dictates?"

A wry smile crossed Lupa's face. "That doesn't sound like a great idea. If our Atma had a fight up here, that too-savvy bishop of yours would be sure to leap in and break it up by force. Moreover--" he looked toward Sera's room again as a fresh peal of laughter came from that direction-- "I wouldn't want to startle that poor girl needlessly. She seems to have had more than her fill of misfortune already. Plus, she-- Sera, her name is? She *thanked* me."

"Really?"

"She said 'Thank you for saving me. And I'm sorry for having been so startled.'" Lupa snickered. "I didn't quite understand what she meant, at first, but Jinana was kind enough to explain it to me. I think it's a good thing, being thanked by someone like that. A different sort of good than being victorious in battle.

"Oh, and she said something else, too. She said it sounded like the old me was your and Heat's 'father'."

"Father?" Serph tried the word out. Even Sera was often at a loss to explain the strange terms that unwittingly came out of her mouth.

"The way she described it, it sounds like it's someone who protects those who are weaker and smaller than him. He teached them things, and helped guide them. She mentioned 'father' and 'child', I think it was." Lupa turned and rubbed his neck meditatively. "Oh, and she also used the word 'son'. 'Children--' that's the plural of 'child'-- in general sound like they're something like Newbies, but a 'son' seems to be a certain type of child, one that has a special sort of relationship with the 'father'."

Serph nodded. "Sounds like there are a lot of different distinctions to make."

"So it seems, yes. These Newbies-like 'children', when they get bigger, become 'adults'. When a 'son' grows bigger, he also becomes an 'adult', but to the father, the child is still his 'son', and the relationship between them does not change."

It was clear from Lupa's dubious tone that he hadn't fully absorbed all of what he'd been told. Serph was struggling to get the gist of it, as well, and Lupa shrugged apologetically. "Well, it's hard to make sense of, but it sounds like the part about the old me taking care you two in as Newbies and showing you the ropes is true enough. Maybe the lot of us did used to fight alongside each other-- no, I'm sure enough that we did. I feel like we've been through countless battles together, the three of us."

"We have, Lupa," Serph said reassuringly. "And you were the best of us. Even Heat said so. Well, not in so many words-- you know how he is-- but we both couldn't have asked for a better leader than you. If it hadn't been for you, I don't think we'd be where we are now."

"Your words humble me. I don't have any actual memory of any of that, and yet..." Lupa scratched at his chin, and then he smiled. "It seems a shame that I don't remember anything from back then. I bet I'd have a good laugh at a memory of you two as young pups."

Serph's face scrunched up in dismay. "Maybe it's better you don't remember, then. I don't think I could take you bursting into laughter whenever you looked at me."

Lupa let out a loud chuckle. "Well, you are a 'child'. I suppose you would say that." His face then turned suddenly serious. "Serph, what do you think it is that the Church has taken from us?"

"Taken from us?" Serph wasn't sure what to say. It wasn't anything he'd ever stopped to think about. To Serph, and his companions, the Church had simply been the authority that ordered them to fight, and that judged the karma of the dead before purifying it and sending fresh Newborns out into the world. Now that he'd been given cause to question that whole line of thinking, he wondered how much of what he'd heard from that quarter had actually been true.

"Maybe this is all just because I was sent back out here without memories of my former self," Lupa said. He got up and stood beside Serph, his eyes gazing out past the darkened expanse of Ajna to the gleaming white Temple spire in Sahasrara. "The Church claims to cleanse us of our sins." His eyes seemed to burn with a dangerous ferocity as he glared at that unblemished tower rising up from the surrounding ruins to pierce the heavens. "But who is it who commits the sins here? Who is it who commands us to fight on and on without end-- who cleanses only to have us

sin again by butchering one another until we are killed once more? Who has the right to strip me of my own memories with the justification that those, too, are 'sin'?"

"I--"

"I don't remember any of the times we fought at each other's side," Lupa said quietly. His voice was heavy with vexation and regret. "But I'm certain I was there with you. I can feel it. And somehow, I know that the days we had together weren't bad ones. And yet still they must be regarded as sins? Is helping one another and being comrades-in-arms a sin? Is coming together to talk, to laugh and smile together as we did, a sin-- something to be washed away and erased?"

The fain echo of voices from Sera's room continued. Serph let out a sigh, and looked back into Lupa's stricken face.

"I don't think it is," Lupa said after another moment. "The Church is hiding something. They have been deceiving our eyes, like they did with the perception filter that hid the sewer system from us, and they have turned the Junkyard into a place where they harvest something from us. Paradise is nothing more than an illusion to distract us from the truth.

"We've never had cause to question whether it actually existed or not. But by bestowing us with our Atma, the Church has given us the ability to think outside the boundaries they set for us. I don't know why they are looking for the girl, but no matter what happens, I have no intention of letting them get their hands on her. That goes double for the fat man and his black-winged lackey. I'm going to do what *I* think is right, and I will not let the Church take away the things that are important to me ever again."

There, Serph thought. *That's the Lupa I know*. There was that independent spirit, the defiant streak always rippling near the surface-- the things that had driven how the old Lupa lived his life. He was a man who had declined the easy salvation offered by joining the tribal struggle for paradise; who was always resolute, never allowing anyone but himself to decide what he could and could not do. It was his will alone that determined his actions.

Now that Serph thought back on it, perhaps the reason he and Heat had followed the old Lupa in the first place had been due a subconscious attraction to the sheer, unbrindled strength he'd exihibited. The fact that, even now, Heat- never one to heed what others had to say-- treated this new Lupa as a leader on pure reflex was proof of the respect and affection they'd held for the old Lupa, as well as the trust they had in him as a leader. Or perhaps it was a sign that they thought of him as something more-- as someone who guided them, as a fellow member of the tribe. As a 'father'.

Sera had called this place their 'home'. She had called them a 'family'.

"The things that are important to you. Does that include us?" Serph asked as the thought came to his mind.

"Of course it does. Did you think it didn't? I'm wounded." Lupa spoke lightly, but he actually did look upset by the notion. "You, Heat, Sera... the other members of the Embryon and the Maribel as all important to me, as are of course the remaining members of the Wolves. Those bastards from the Church would have us think Sera is the only thing worth protecting, but I'll

have none of that. Everyone here, without fail, is someone I consider important, and I want to protect them all."

Lupa looked up. "Which reminds me," he added, holding up the Wolves' leader's tag ring. "What should we do with this? It's probably not a good idea for us to face off as Varuna and as Cerberus, and I'm not going to just take it because you tell me to."

"Then how about you hold onto it for me for safekeeping for now?" Serph suggested. "Perhaps someday you will feel worthy of accepting it, and even if you wind up thinking you're not, you can return it to me then. Whichever it winds up being... something tells me I should give it to you. Try not to fret over it."

"'Something tells you'? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're probably going to laugh at me again," Serph hesitated to say, "but I honestly have trouble seeing you as anything other than a leader. It just doesn't feel right to me."

Lupa's expression was blank, and after a while, Serph sheepishly looked away; but then Lupa let out another boisterous laugh and reached to tousle Serph's hair, just as Serph had done to Sera not so long before.

"Hey, cut it out. I'm not just some upstart youngster anymore."

"I suppose not. Now you're Serph of the Embryon, a youngster standing proud atop of a group of four tribes." Lupa let out another laugh as the younger man tried to bat his hand away.

Serph huffed indignantly and smoothed his hair back into place. Lupa slipped the tag ring into a pocket in his combat suit. "So it's really okay for me to put this on when I decide to accept leadership authority over the Wolves from you? I can't promise when that might be, mind."

"It really is okay. -- And I'm not a youngster."

"Oh, don't let it get to you. Now Heat-- oh, I bet he'd get *real* mad. I should try it on him." Lupa said with another chuckled as he straightened back up. "Now, should we go and help out that kid sidekick of yours? I feel sort of bad for him now. I just hope we can stop Jinana. You coming?"

"Absolutely. If I didn't, Cielo would probably hold it against me for the rest of my life." The two men started to head back down into the base; but as he got his hand on the door, Serph stopped.

"Lupa?"

"Yes?"

"There was something I've been wanting to ask: why us?"

Lupa looked at him curiously. His reddish eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What do you mean, 'why?'"

"I mean, why did the former you decide to take in me and Hear?" Serph said. "Heat I can understand, sure, but I can't see that I would've looked particularly strong. But you just came in and picked me and Heat without a second thought."

Lupa tilted his head slightly, as if silently asking Serph to go on.

"*You* were strong. Strong enough to survive on your own in the Junkyard without the help of a tribe. So then what would make you want to take on a pair of Newbies like us?" He couldn't keep

the pleading tone from his voice as he continued. "Back then, we shouldn't have been anything but a burden to you. You were a strict leader, to be sure, but thanks to that, we're where we are now. But I just don't understand why you'd want to have taken us in the first place."

The more Serph said, the more awkward and embarrassed he felt. After all, he knew Lupa didn't remember that old life. At last he fell silent, and looked away. "Sorry," he said after a moment. "That was a weird thing to ask. Forget about it."

"Wait," Lupa said, setting a gentle hand on Serph's shoulder as he tried to turn away. "I've tried to remember the old me, but I just can't do it. And I'm sorry that I don't have the answer you're looking for." After a moment, his mouth split into a broad, toothy grin. "But when I look at the two of you now, I think that the old me would probably be proud. Don't get me wrong, though-- you've still got a long way to go. But I guess only a youngster like you would ask me such a silly question."

"Oh, shut up. I already told you not to call me that. And hey, hands off!" A smile had come to Serph's lips before he'd even realized it.

The door closed behind them. The rain continued to fall. And behind that silvery curtain, the white tower continued to shine with its dazzling brilliance.

There was an echoing cry of pain.

Ajna was under a blanket of darkness, and in the depths of the Brutes' headquarters, in its innermost sanctum, a man writhed on the floor, his body dripping with cold sweat.

"I did warn you, after all." The voice bore a trace of grim humor, and no sympathy whatsoever for the anguish of the one who squirmed on the cold concrete. The speaker's reaction to the horrid sight could best be called one of callous curiosity.

The man in pain had laid waste to the entire room in the course of his struggling about. His chair had been thrown into the wall, his monitor smashed to bits, his walls and floor pitted and scarred all over. The room's other occupant, a young fellow in a white robe, sat with legs crossed atop the one undamaged desk in the room. Half of his face was covered by a pair of black goggles, but they did nothing to hide his thin lips, curled as they were into a scornful smile.

"Using that power puts a drain on the resources-- oh, let's call it the life force-- that allows you to exist here. Without the Technoshaman, the EGG is suffering a drastic drop in its computational capacity. It still retains processing power that far outstrips any normal supercomputer, but we are rapidly approaching its limits. If we do not recover her and get a handle on the situation quickly, the strain is only going to grow worse."

At long last, the other man looked up, his head so drenched with sweat it looked like it had been doused with a bucket of water. "She won't get away again," he roared hoarsely. "Taking out the Wolves taught me how to use this power. The Embryon are next. I will kill the man who killed me-- do what you like with the girl, but he's mine. I will make him suffer as he did me. I

will tear his guts out while he's still alive, I will tear his limbs from his body, and then-- while he is still alive-- I will devour him piece by piece."

"That's the spirit, Colonel," said the man from the Church. With a tiny clap of his hands he slid off of the desk. He stepped past the other man, who remained, wracked with pain, on the floor, and exited the room, his white cape billowing behind him. Further cries of suffering echoed into the empty space.

In the depths of the Temple, there was yet another darkness.

This was the place where the denizens of the Junkyard who had been destroyed were processed-- their combat records absorbed into the system, and then their abilities randomized and recomposed into new combatants.

Now, however, there was darkness. And... something else. An entity, a semi-sentient thing twisting in the shadows.

The thing groaned in pain. And then in hunger. It was not capable of true thought, but it perceived the world around it, and gnawed obsessively on distinct memories.

It remembered consuming. And then it remembered being devoured in turn, while still alive.

There had been hot flames hot enough to burn its body to a crisp; the agony of being torn apart bit by bit; the shock of lightning coursing through its very being; the strain of being crushed by an intense gravitational force; the fear of being eaten. And then death.

So many, many deaths. Too many to possibly count.

The thing was tormented, agonized by the injury inflicted upon it underneath Vishuddha. Foremost among the countless deaths it had known, it was the memory of its first death that made its pain all the more excruciating. *The slender, small-statured young man with silver hair and eyes...* Whenever his visage appeared amongst those thoughts that were not quite thoughts, the thing felt fear and rage pulse through it, followed by an even more ardent hunger that made its whole form quiver.

I want to eat. And then I want to eat more.

I don't want to die. I don't... want... to die.

These emotions, impossible to convert into a simple binary code, could not be recognized by the system.

Fear, anger, sadness, and pain-- these things could not be processed or absorbed.

Another bubble blubbed up to the surface.

The darkness, unable to be purified, shook violently and let out a voiceless scream.

Chapter 7

Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.
-Shakespeare, *Macbeth* - Act 3, Scene 2

"We can no longer place our trust in the Church."

The words hung heavily in the air of the new command center, where the leaders of the allied tribes had gathered for their first formal strategy session since establishing the new facility in the largest of the Citadel's many control rooms.

The space was a mess, chaotic and disheveled, with various pieces of equipment stacked about haphazardly; but at least all of the essentials were present. The tactical planning table had been set up in the middle of the circular chamber, surrounded by a collection of chairs and terminals; the semitransparent holo-monitor projected up from the tabletop toward the room's high ceiling. Supply vending units along the walls could quickly dispense foodstuffs, small arms, and other equipment, though larger goods weren't so readily available.

The room's exterior had been armored with multiple sheets of nearly indestructible synthetic carbon crystal that had been discovered in one of the storerooms. Holes drilled for wiring and fiber optics had been carefully sealed with high temperature silicon. Ventilation shafts and other ducting were sealed off by multiple layers of tight mesh-and in the event that intruders did try to enter the chamber via the ductwork, they would be further hindered by the dust filtration units and complex air purification systems in their way. With the identity and capabilities of their foes not fully known, the alliance had followed Gale's proposal to shore up their defenses as much as possible.

They had also made a concerted effort to ensure that the command area, like the living quarters where Sera was now ensconced, was free of any traps or secret passageways left behind by the Solids. Well aware that they might be stalked by an enemy with some sort of invisible Atma, as well as the malevolent black ooze that might conceivably attack from anywhere, the alliance leaders had decided it was critical that their base of operations be highly defensible and offer limited points of entry.

And yet, Serph thought, *there are still far too many variables to consider*. In addition to rival tribes, the mysterious invisible Atma, and the black substance, now there was also the Church to fear. The ruling authority-hitherto always a neutral party- was evidently neutral no more.

Serph gazed at his fellow leaders, their expressions pensive. Gale was hunched over his console, face awash in the bluish light emanating from it.

"The Church-or whoever is behind it- has made it clear that they are directly acting against us," the Embryon leader said. "They are using the Brutes and Varin Omega as tools to try to take Sera away from us. Until recently, for them to take such an action would have been unthinkable."

Serph stood up from his chair and began to type at the tactical planning table, calling up the display for the Church's Dissemination system. A white humanlike visage hovered over the table. Its thin, slit-like lips were moving, but there was no sound. Serph looked over at Gale.

"There have been a number of unexpected updates to the connection protocols," the bishop responded. "I am currently protected by my firewall. Before the manifestation of the Atma, data was freely accessible, but currently, access is closed off, and now only compromised and corrupted data is disseminated. At present, useful access from our terminal is impossible."

Serph nodded and cut the connection. The white face wavered and then broke apart, the pieces dissolving in the projector's dim glow. "Well. I don't think we could trust any information from them anyhow. At this point, we have no choice but to consider the Church an enemy. They have clearly commandeered the Brutes for their own purposes, and Varin Omega is nothing less than their puppet."

"The Brutes also appear to have had advanced knowledge that we had Sera, in addition to knowing what her blood is capable of," Jinana pointed out gravely. "I'm assuming that they got their basic intel from Bat... but who's this agent from the Church that Mick mentioned?"

"If the Church is controlling the Brutes, then maybe it's one of the warrior priests, or maybe even someone higher-ranking-- perhaps the one called 'Angel'?" Lupa suggested.

"Maybe," Serph replied. "I got the impression that Angel wasn't capable of interfering with anything here directly, though. Whoever Angel is, it could only hijack the Dissemination Machine for a limited window of time. In any event, we know that *someone* is whispering into Varin Omega's ear--either someone from the Church, or someone who's controlled by them behind the scenes."

Lupa folded his arms and settled back in his chair. "Then there's this 'Colonel' thing," he said. "What's that all about? Why would Varin start calling himself that?"

"The Brutes also seem to want to get their hands on Serph," Gale added. "Based on Mick's statements, it would seem that this is unrelated to any directives from the Church, and is instead something Varin Omega himself wishes. I do not comprehend his apparently irresistible drive to personally kill and devour our leader, as it only puts the Brutes at further risk given the rapid military expansion of the Embryon, but it seems evident that he holds some kind of personal animosity toward Serph."

"But why? I've only met Varin Omega once, when we both appeared at the Temple together; he was behind a screen-- I never even saw his face, or spoke to him directly. What could make him so intent on killing me personally?"

"Could you perhaps be like me-- maybe you've lost memories of a previous life?" Lupa said contemplatively. "Perhaps you killed him in the life you lived before this one."

"That seems too farfetched an explanation," Gale said. "Varin Omega has been the leader of the Brutes and ruler of Ajna for quite some time-- since five years before Serph left the Temple gates as a Newborn, in fact. Considering the amount of time it took him to establish the Brutes and to then subjugate Ajna, there is little to justify the idea that the cause of his hostility relates to some previous incarnation of Serph."

"Then it must be the Church," Jinana said. There was a fire in her eyes. "I find it easy enough to believe this 'messenger from the Church' that Mick mentioned has put this idea into Varin Omega's head; the question is, why? What does it gain them?"

The other three exchanged uncertain glances, and Jinana went on. "They can't believe that killing Serph alone will bring down this alliance we've forged. I won't deny that it would be a major setback to our military capabilities, but it would also fiercely galvanize our troops. It could conceivably cost them more than it's worth. Perhaps we need to accept that there *is* no reason for them wanting to target Serph specifically."

"We must not forget that the Church has made the apprehension of 'the black-haired girl' --Sera-- their primary objective, and that, in the end, it is likely they mean to use us all as pawns to achieve that end," Gale pointed out. "Let us consider the facts we have.

"Mick said that Varin Omega has begun having his tribe members refer to him as 'Colonel'," he continued. "We have confirmed this by interrogating some of the Brutes that we apprehended. Ever since this envoy from the Church appeared, Varin Omega has been in a state of visible unease and distress, spending the majority of his time in his quarters. Apparently he has repeatedly destroyed his living space in fits of rage. While he has not gone wholly berserk, the reports of his tribe members indicate that they fear him."

Gale's fingers moved across the console, and the display monitor changed to show footage of one of the interrogation sessions.

"Ever since that guy from the Church turned up, our leader has been acting strange." The Brute sat in a chair in a gray concrete cell, his eyes darting about like those of a fearful rodent, his body shifting back and forth. He showed no signs of defiance, and appeared to be answering the interrogator's questions openly. *"He keeps saying he's a colonel-- Colonel Van Beck-- and that this place is hell, and all of us are ghosts. That we're all dead. He keeps screaming about how he's going to get out of here, and it's left him at the point where he's pale and sickly. He'll snarl and draw his gun if anyone so much as tries to talk to him."*

The captive's eyes twitched constantly, jerking this way and that as if searching for an escape route. Even through the grainy footage, the whites of his eyes were visibly bloodshot. *"He doesn't let any of us near him. The only person he talks to is that guy from the Church, and each time he does, he gets a little weirder."*

The interrogator's voice sounded from off-screen. *"Tell me more about this individual from the Church."*

"I only saw him once, at a distance," the Brute replied, shaking his head. *"He was dressed like one of the warrior priests; he wore a white suit along the short cape or cloak, and his gloves had the emblem of the Church on the back of them. And his hair was black."*

Jinana let out a brief gasp of shock.

"Black hair?" Lupa raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't get a good look at his face. He always wears these black goggles that cover half of it. But he's slender, and short-statured. I don't know if he has an Atma brand or not; I never saw one."

Gale stopped the footage there. The other three leaders were silent for a few moments.

"Black hair, huh?" Serph said at last. "Black hair, just like Sera. Do you think this means she has some connection to this fellow from the Church?"

"When I was talking to Argilla the other day, she suggested that maybe Sera is from this Nirvana the Church speaks of," Jinana said. "And I think that's a distinct possibility. She knows far too much about things and ideas that don't even exist here in the Junkyard. The fact that her blood has the power to suppress Atma makes some sense, too, if Atma is something that ultimately was unleashed by the Church-- maybe it's from Nirvana too. But then, if the Church *wants* our Atma to go berserk, why does her blood do the opposite of what they want?"

"Sera told us that she came here to help everyone," Serph said. That felt so long ago, now. "It would seem that there are two different movements within the Church: there's Angel's faction, intent on facilitating the power of Atma, and then there are those like Sera, who can suppress it."

"Then the girl is a hindrance to the spread of Atma through the world?" Jinana asked.

"No, I don't think so," Serph replied. "Rather, I think that, for some reason or another, this group of Angel's that's overtaking the Church might actually *need* Sera."

"The Church was rather insistent that the black-haired girl be brought to them alive," Gale noted. "This implies that her death would be a setback for them."

"In that case," Lupa said, "why not send a warrior priest as their agent directly, like they did with the Brutes, and just take her from us? Wouldn't that be far more expedient for them?"

"There must be some sort of limitation in effect," Serph said. "It might be that Angel's faction can't just interfere wherever and whenever they want."

Jinana nodded in agreement. "That seems right. They don't appear to have free reign to do anything they please. Like we saw in that meeting at the Temple, Serph-- they appear limited both in terms of what they can do, and for how long--and so they're desperate, using the Brutes and ourselves to try to get Sera back through more indirect means. That must also be why they gave Varin Omega the power of the invisible Atma."

"Assuming that the invisible Atma really is Varin Omega... why would they need to give that power to him specifically?" Serph asked. "Sure, it might be tough for them to get a tribe other than the Brutes to side with them, but what's to stop them from simply giving this invisible Atma to a Newborn and having the newcomer himself infiltrate us directly? I can't see why they'd need

to use Omega himself. Or why they'd need to put this strange thought in his head that he's some colonel with a different name."

Jinana was lost in thought, tapping her fingers atop the table as Serph went on. "Mick the Slug said that if he didn't bring me back alive, it would 'be his head.' Sera might be one of the requirements for gaining access to Nirvana, but I'm not. If they just wanted to take down our alliance, wouldn't this invisible Atma be trying to get the three of us together and kill us? Why go through so much effort to take me and me alone alive?"

"This may all be related to the very place where Church-- or this individual calling itself Angel-- is located: Nirvana." Jinana added. "The Church itself is no longer operating at full functionality. Bishop Gale, could you please show us the Church's Newborn production status?"

"There is nothing to show; the Church has ceased production of Newborns," Gale replied bluntly.

There was a minor clamor at the table. Jinana looked coolly at Gale; apparently she had already realized this herself. Serph, however, was quite taken aback. "Ceased production? Since When?"

"There is no indication of any Newborns having been produced since the generation to which Lupa belongs," Gale replied. "It may be that the Church bestowed the invisible Atma upon Varin Omega because they had no other choice. There should have been two additional production runs since Lupa's appearance, but there has been no activity at the Nest, and the relevant databases have not been updated. At present, the Junkyard is populated solely by individuals who were granted Atma, or those like Lupa who were created with their Atma already imbued within them."

"Could that be because corpses are being devoured, leaving nothing behind?" Serph asked. "Without the dead left behind to become rain and rejoin the cycle of samsara, there may be no resources left to create more Newborns at this point."

"That is merely conjecture; however, it is one likely hypothesis," Gale replied. "We must also not overlook the existence of the black sludge-entity. It does inhabit and move through the waterways where the Rain of the Dead accumulates; if these waterways do in fact flow to the chasm of samsara beneath the Temple, it is conceivable that this black mass has made its wat into the system and rendered it nonfunctional."

Lupa furrowed his brow, and Serph guessed that he, too, was recalling the grisly sight of the ruin of his former leader back at the Wolves' hideout.

"The invisible Atma must be the Church and Angel's doing," said Jinana. "But the black ooze is an abomination. It isn't right. It's something that isn't meant to be. Even though Varin Omega is being manipulated by the Church, he's still a denizen of the Junkyard. And this invisible Atma is still an Atma, at least. But the black ooze is something else. It's wrong. It's something far more sinister than Atma-- I think even Sera would agree. I haven't even seen it with my own eyes, but just from hearing the stories about it, I can tell that, whatever it is, it isn't like any of the other things that the Church has brought into this world."

"Gale," Serph said. "do you think that the Church-- or Angel-- might know anything about this black ooze?"

"There is insufficient data to make any reliable conjecture on that point; we can be certain, however, that this 'Angel' has some type of connection to both the invisible Atma and this emissary sent by the Church."

"Can someone tell me this-- just what is Nirvana, this world that Sera might have come from?" Lupa asked, leaning forward in his chair. There was an uneasy glimmer in his eyes. "I've never believed in this 'paradise' the Church had promised us, and I'm not about to start believing in such tripe now. But the fact that Sera is here, and that the Church is interfering with things from someplace other than here, must mean that Nirvana--or whatever other world Angel and the others are from-- has got to exist."

"Setting aside whether that place is the paradise of Nirvana or not," Jinana said quietly, "we can just as well ask, what is this 'Junkyard' we're all living in now? Why are we here, to fight and die, only to be reborn over and over? And then to be marked with these brands..." She cast her eyes down as she laid a hand on her lower back, where the mark of her Atma curled on her skin.

Serph followed suit, his hand going to his cheek; he could feel a tingling sensation in his fingertips. Lupa silently stroked his own abdomen.

"Why has a life of killing other people and devouring their flesh in order to survive been foisted upon us?" Jinana demanded. "The Church, the Junkyard, Sera-- just what are any of these things?"

The moments ticked by but no one offered an answer. The only sound in the room was the faint hum coming from the footage of the captured Brute's interrogation.

And then a drawn-out scream sounded in the distance.

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Lupa lifted his head up like an alerted animal, and a moment later, everyone shot to their feet. Tension filled the air of the room. They could hear shouting somewhere inside the base, and bursts of gunfire; red lights flashed as the emergency siren began to blare--and then abruptly ceased.

"That came from Sera's room/"

"What's going on? Security team, report!" Gale barked as he jammed the intercom switch.

Fot a moment there was nothing but an electronic hum. Then they heard a weak, unsteady voice. "Maximum Security Zone...reporting in..."

"What happened? Why did the siren go off just now? Report on your status!"

"I-I don't know. Out of nowhere, the guy standing next to me was just bowled right over, and then--"The report was cut short by an ear-piercing scream. Next came the sound of a liquid splatter, followed by a dull, heavy thud. After that, there was only an empty electronic buzz, which ended in a mechanical grating sound as the transmitter was apparently destroyed.

"This is just like what happened with the Wolves," Lupa said, already rushing for the exit. "It's him-- the invisible Atma. He's come after Sera. Let's go!"

The four companions hurried from the briefing room, racing toward Sera's quarter in the innermost section of the base. They'd chosen that location for her because they'd judged it the safest place in the Citadel; to reach it, an intruder had to penetrate multiple barriers and pass through several checkpoints. How had an enemy managed to sneak in?

"Serph! Lupa!" It was Heat, accompanied by Cielo; the pair appeared at an intersection along the way.

"What was that sound, buddy?" Cielo asked. "it sounded like it came from Sera's room."

"She's under attack," Serph said. "We're not sure by whom. Argilla is with her, right?"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than they heard a massive boom, and a section of wall came crashing down just ahead of them. A tribe member, his Atma transformation coming undone, crawled groaning from the rubble. "Sir--" he croaked, then coughed up a gout of blood, staining the shattered concrete with drops of crimson.

"Hang in there, soldier! What happened? Who's attacking us?"

"I... I couldn't see anything. Suddenly, there was just something next to me, this incredible force--ah!" The man jerked and quivered, letting out a death rattle. A patch of red blood seeped across his back. Serph, feeling a sudden, unsettling presence in the air, leapt out of the way, bracing himself as an unseen force like a powerful gust of wind came rushing at him.

Something fluttered down in front of his eyes. He realized that it was a few locks of his own hair, sliced from his head, and a chill shot up his spine.

"Oh, looks like I missed."

The voice seemed to emanate from an empty space--empty save for the faintest outline of a pair of lips, barely visible to Serph's intent gaze.

They smiled.

"Well, no matter. It'd be no fun to kill you quickly, anyway. I've been waiting a long time to make you suffer before you die, the same way you did to me. -- But first, the girl."

The intimidating presence drew closer, its threat tangible despite the invisibility. Serph transformed his right forearm into that of his Atma, swinging the blade with all his might, but struck only empty air. Crude laughter echoed all around him. Heat growled with rage as the presence retreated into the distance; he hurled a fireball in its direction, but to the same effect. A moment later, they were left alone, dumbstruck, with nothing but the fragments of rubble and the corpse of the Embryon soldier.

"Was that really Varin just--"

"Talk later!" Lupa snapped. "We need to get to Sera. She must be his target. We have to go after him. There's no way Argilla can stand against him on her own."

Lupa's voice galvanized the others to action. Serph shook his head to rid himself of the confusion as he hurried on down the corridor, while Heat snarled through clenched jaws, hot on his heels. Jinana and Cielo had both gone pale. Gale's face was steely with resolve.

The group scrambled upward along a direct passageway to the living quarters that had been set aside for emergency use. When they were halfway up, they felt a rumbling through their feet so hard that it made the entire base shake. Serph heard the buzz and felt the slight weight increase that were signs of the use of gravity control.

"Argilla is fighting," said Jinana through clenched teeth. "Has he gotten to her already?"

It took them another two minutes to reach the floor where Sera was. The hallway there was littered with the bodies of tribe members who had come to deal with the intruder; some were still in Atma form, writhing and groaning, but the vast majority lay unmoving, their blood scattered and sprayed all about.

Cielo broke ahead of the others. "Sera!" he called out, transforming as he ran. Wavering blue light enveloped him, and then he spread his wings as Dyaus, flying toward her room at amazing speed. "I don't know who you are, you bastard, but if you so much as lay a finger on Sera, I'll--"

Abruptly he was stopped short, as if he'd struck an invisible wall. Someone unseen had grabbed him by the throat. An instant later, he was slammed into the wall with incredible force--once, twice, three times.Dyaus' limbs hung limp, like those of a marionette whose strings had been cut. Several bright rivulets of blood streamed down from his fanged mouth.

"Cielo!" Serph cried out as he transformed. The form of Varuna emerged from the flash of blue light, rushing with blades drawn toward whoever had Dyaus shoved up against the wall.

"I don't think so!" snarled a scoffing voice as Dyaus was hurled to the floor. Serph felt a presence behind him, followed by a sudden pain as his arms were pinned behind his back. His vertebrae creaked, and he let out a cry of agony.

"S...Sir..." Argilla came staggering into view from Sera's room. She had taken the form of Prithvi, but she already had been gravely injured; she was clearly having difficulty walking. "He's... He's strong. Be careful, you... can't see him... and he's... fast."

A ferocious power welled up inside of Serph, and he flashed his teeth as he let out a roar, using his full might to throw off his opponent's hold. Spinning around, he lashed out with a counterstrike, but his blades cut through nothingness.

Triumphant laughter echoed from somewhere else entirely. "You're pathetic! To think that I could've ever been beaten by the likes of you!"

The others had now transformed, as well. Agni looked this way and that, hunting for his foe, only to take a blow to the torso that sent him flying. He struck the wall with an echoing slam and collapsed on the spot, unable to get right back up. Gale, as Vayu, twisted his head side to side, likewise seeking the enemy out with murderous intent, but to no avail. Jinana--Ushas-- fired indiscriminately with her deadly tendrils of golden hair, but the enemy managed to avoid even that barrage, as if he didn't have physical form at all.

"I see now that it was a mistake to send those traitors to do the job. I should have just come and handled it myself!"

"Show yourself!" Lupa had become Cerberus, fangs on display as he growled. "Let's finish what you started by coming after my tribesmen and my leader. Come out and face *me*!"

"Oho, so you're one of the surviving Wolves, are you?" The voice was suddenly much closer. Lupa braced himself, but just as he did, a raw lurid sound filled the air as a gaping hole opened in Cerberus' body. Blood and gore flew as the three-headed beast collapsed.

"Lupa!" Agni scrabbled free of the rubble and leapt forward. At the same time, Varuna sprung into action as well, both of his blades fully extended.

Neither of them got far. Varuna was struck by an unseen arm, thrown up against the ceiling before dropping down to the floor in a heap. Agni's fireballs were batted away amidst uproarious laughter, and as the two-headed creature tried to sink his teeth into his prey, it was he, in turn, who was caught by the throat.

"Aren't you a pitiful sight, Kaz Homura," the invisible adversary said with a chuckle, dangling the crimson demon from one hand. "Still protecting that witch when it's her fault you were cast down here and turned into a monster in the first place? What a disgrace!"

"What're you... talking about?" Unable to maintain his transformation, the form of Agni slowly shifted back into that of Heat. His crimson eyes smoldered with rage and indignation as he tried to glare back at an enemy he couldn't even see.

The faint shadow-lips once again twisted into a mocking smile. "Such a pity that you don't even know." With a mighty swing, the invisible for hurled Heat into the wall. Soft flesh shattered hard concrete; when he fell, he did not rise again. A mere moment later, Jinana and Gale were both cut down with a single sweeping blow before they even had a chance to strike.

The invisible creature stood above them as they both reverted to human form. "You two I don't know," it spat. " I have no regard for the likes of you; you couldn't possibly understand what it is I'm trying to accomplish here. But Angel will explain everything once we've returned to reality."

Serph tried his best to track his foe, forcing his hazy eyes to stay open, but the best he could do was catch the occasional faint glimmer that wavered away before he could follow it. His transformation, too, had ended. His leg and possibly hit sternum were broken, along with several ribs that felt like they were digging into his internal organs. Whenever he tried to move, a searing pain flared into his chest.

"W-Wait..." It was Argilla, her face twisted with desperation. She crawled forward from where she'd collapsed by the door. No longer was she in the form of Prithvi. "We're not... letting you take Sera. We're going... to protect her."

"Still sprouting the same old prattle, I see. You pathetic little bitch." An unseen foot stomped onto Argilla's head, pressing her face into the floor, then twisting cruelly back and forth. "How much of a dumb whore can you be to stay by the side of the man who did nothing but use you before he killed and devoured you? But then, I never did quite understand Italian broads."

"What are you talking about? Let go of me, you bast--"

"How dare you speak to me like that!" Argilla let out a scream as her back was bowed sharply inwards. Then she went limp.

"I am *Colonel van Beck!*"the voice continued. "Do you filthy maggots really think that your words will have any effect on me?"

Neither Serph nor any of his companions could move-- all they could do was try to keep their eye on an enemy they couldn't see. Its voice, however, resonated loud and clear. "I'm not just some ghost like the rest of you, you hear me? I'm going to get out of here. All of this misery is the fault of that girl-- of that witch-- and I swear on my pride and my honor as a soldier that I will eliminate anyone who stands in my way."

"Varin... Omega..." Serph finally managed to croak.

"Do not call me by that name." The air rippled, and for only a moment, a massive shadow hovered there, like a reflection on the surface of the water; then it disappeared again. " I am a colonel. I am Colonel van Beck. Do not address me so flippantly, maggot; it sickens me."

A moment later, a shriek sounded from inside Sera's room. Argilla and Cielo both cried out the girl's name, but neither could fight past their pain enough to rise to their feet. Sera had hidden herself away deep as instructed, but she was dragged out flailing and struggling all the same. She appeared to float in midair, feet unable to reach the ground as her invisible captor carried her.

The color drained from her face the instant she saw her friends strewn on the floor. "Serph... you guys..."

"Come after me if you can, Shin Minase."

Serph raised his head, his jaw clenched. The name was unfamiliar, but he could feel the invisible glare directed at him.

"You alone I will not grant an easy death. I will be satisfied with nothing less than making you suffer the same as you did me. If you want the girl back, gather up your companions and come for me in Ajna. And then I will kill you, one by one, torn limb from limb. Nothing else will satisfy my grudge. Are you willing to repay me in blood for murdering me?"

"No!" Sera cried out. "Let me go! Serph--!"

"Sera, don't!" Argilla shrieked. She had recovered enough to lift her head; her face was aghast as she saw that Sera had a small-caliber pistol in her hand and was raising it toward her own head. But even as the girl pulled the trigger, an unseen hand yanked her arm back, wrenching the muzzle in a different direction.

The muted gunshot was followed by a scream of rage.

"Bitch!" Sera took an invisible blow to the side of her face; she let out a soft yelp and her body went slack. The pistol fell from her hand and clattered on the floor. The invisible creature's glimmering silhouette lost its transparency for a moment, and blood dripped down, giving off an oily rainbow sheen. "You actually managed to hust me. I'm not going to forget this, girl."

The creature's outline was now faintly visible, clutching its bleeding arm as it flashed its teeth. A small bullet was expelled from amidst its blurry contours, fell to the ground, and rolled away; by the time it ceased moving, the enemy had again vanished into thin air.

"The same goes for the rest of you maggots. If you care about this girl, then get your sorry asses back together as fast as you can and come to Ajna, where you will die. Do that, and I'll see to it that the girl suffers no mistreatment."

Serph tried his utmost to drag himself to his feet. "W-Wait..."

But it was no use. The enemy had already disappeared, taking Sera with him, leaving only the thick stench of blood and the foul smell of burning lingering in the air.

There were thirty-nine dead, and another seventeen severely injured.

The base had also been severely damaged; the floor where Sera had been kept was now so completely destroyed that it was beyond repair.

Most of the dead had been killed before they even had a time to realize they were under attack; those who had the chance to engage their Atma and fight back hadn't lasted much longer. The only reason that the allied tribes hadn't been effectively decimated the way the Wolves had was that the invisible Atma--Varin Omega-- had focused on abducting Sera. They were fortunate he hadn't made a point of stopping by the other floors along the way.

Nevertheless, the Embryon coalition had suffered great losses. First and foremost was the fact that Sera had been taken. Beyond that, though, almost all of the tribes' troops were injured. Lupa had a giant hole blasted in his torso, and Cielo had been severely wounded again having just recovered from his old injuries. Thanks to Cerberus' advanced healing abilities, it looked like Lupa would be back on his feet in about two days, but Cielo was going to be sidelined for quite some time.

"The mission to Ajna is a critical one," Serph said firmly to Cielo; the boy was strapped down into his bed, and complaining rather vocally about it. "We can't afford to bring along people who are injured. Stay here and recover. And if you disobey one of my direct orders again, I will have you expelled from the Embryon. I am not kidding."

"But..." Cielo balled his hand into a fist, which fell limply back onto the sheets. "But I want to go and save Sera."

"I know you do." There was real sympathy in Serph's words. "But someone needs to be here to welcome her back once she comes home, and we certainly can't have that someone be Gale--he'd just scare her. I'd much rather you were here to make her smile."

Cielo didn't respond, but there was neither time for any further explanation nor any real hope that it would make him understand. With the boy's gaze still cast dejectedly downwards, Serph left the room, leaving strict orders to the tribal guards outside that someone stay by his bedside to keep him under observation at all times.

He also had to contend with the matter of explaining to Gale why *he* needed to stay behind and guard the base. When Serph had decided on the list of people who would be going to Ajna, Gale's reaction, though restrained, nonetheless conveyed a clear protest that his name had once again been left off it.

"Varin Omega did say for you to bring your companions." There was an uncharacteristic forcefulness in his voice; anyone other than Gale would have sounded downright exasperated. Though the bishop didn't raise his voice, there was a palpable anger under the surface. "I believe

that he was indicating all those who were present, including Lupa and Jinana. I am the Embryon's bishop, sir-- I am a member of this tribe as much as anyone else. Kindly spare me the repeated excuse that, as a bishop, I am too valuable to risk. Or do you consider my combat capabilities insufficient, sir?"

"No, Gale. That's not it. It's precisely because I *do* trust you that I want you to be here as backup."

The battle against Varin Omega would likely take all of their combined might. Any given individual needed to be a top-tier combatant. There was little point in bringing along the rank-and-file tribe members who possessed only Lesser Atma, even in high numbers; Varin Omega would likely engage any opponent one-on-one, and the only ones capable of standing even a chance of resisting were those Atma in the same class as Varuna or Agni or, yes, Gale's own Vayu.

But Varin wasn't the only threat to consider: there was still the black sludge, which had subjected the leader of the Wolves to such an ignominious death, and which wandered the sewers wearing the guise of the dead. They could not afford to ignore that; while they'd ascertained the identity and objective of the invisible Atma, the other abomination remained a mystery. While the entryways into the sewers around the Citadel had been welded shut and securely blocked off, if Serph and his companions were correct in guessing that the sewer system extended throughout the whole of the Junkyard, there was no predicting when or where the devouring ooze might appear next.

There remained only the question of who must remain at the allies' base to keep watch against such a threat.

Even if their enemy hadn't called him out specifically, Serph still needed to be part of the mission team if they were to have any hope of getting Sera back. Heat and Argilla were a tactical necessity as well, to say nothing of the fact that neither of them would brook being turned away. Jinana and Lupa had their own personal reason for insisting on coming along as well: Jinana felt that she owed Sera her life, to say nothing of the revenge she wanted on the traitor Bat and his companion Mick; Lupa owed Serph and the others a debt of his own, and he demanded vengeance against the one who had put the Wolves to ruin.

No matter how he looked at it, Serph couldn't bring himself to deny the validity of any of these reasons. In the end, given the damage their headquarters and the heavy casualties they'd suffered, Gale was the only one left to task with handling any sort of attack that might come after the leaders had all departed.

"It is indeed my duty as a bishop to support you as my leader, sir. But what am I to you? Am I nothing more than a convenient tool for drawing up tactical strategies? Would you prefer that I simply be an obedient machine that analyzes information, provides status updates, and follows orders?" His voice was louder, now, and his expression-- which so rarely changed-- had shifted ever so slightly, but still perceptibly, towards anger. The Atma brand on his leg began to glow with greenish light. "I am your bishop, sir. The very reason that I exist is to be at your side, supporting you and keeping you safe. Would you deny me that? Or am I your... your..."

His voice trailed off, and suddenly he snapped his mouth shut. His eyes went wide. Slowly he covered his mouth with a hand. "I..." He appeared shocked by his own outburst.

Bishops were conditioned to discard anything from their consciousness that did not pertain to tactical planning and information analysis, and at present, Gale was likely the only bishop left in the Junkyard who managed a successful balance between his Atma and that conditioning.

Gale always acted as if he couldn't comprehend Serph's intense emotions and more humanlike thought process. That was no doubt due to the fact that he had been created to be a sort of humanoid tactical computer, and not because he had any cause to doubt or question himself.

At least, not until now.

"Gale." Serph held out his hand. He knew Gale's confusion-- or at least, he could understand some small part of it. In all likelihood, what Gale was feeling now was akin to the unease Serph himself had felt just after he'd received his Atma. Perhaps it was even more pronounced than that. As a bishop, Gale had often had cause to furrow his brow at his companions-- how they acted based on their emotions, and how they made irrational decisions at times. Now, before he'd had a chance to process what was happening, he'd come to protest his leader for the most illogical reason possible, one he couldn't even fully put into words: he'd been driven by the impulse of emotions he had never before known.

He brushed Serph's offered hand away and averted his gaze, resting unsteadily against the edge of the table. "I understand, sir," he murmured, his voice regaining its usual emotionless monotone. "I will remain here in your absence and see ot the reconstruction of the base in your stead, and I will command the counteroffensive in the event of any attack. Do you have any additional orders for me, sir?"

Serph was at a loss for words. "Gale, I'm sorry."

"I do not comprehend that sentiment. As bishop of the Embryon, my dute is to follow your orders."

Serph tried to put a hand on his shoulder, but Gale shrugged it away and made to leave the room. "I... do not comprehend," he muttered, stopping just inside the door frame. "I do not comprehend. You have changed, sir."

"Not just me. You've changed, too. So have the others. All of us."

Gale merely gave his head a weak shake and strode from the room without another word. Serph could feel a dull ache in his chest as he was left there, all alone.

With a muddle of thoughts and doubts still lingering in his mind, Serph gathered up the team and left the headquarters early the next LT, heading into Ajna. They encountered almost no resistance along the way. It appeared that Varin Omega was serious about wanting Serph to die by his own hands; there were no signs of the sentries that would normally have been on patrol.

While the different areas of the Junkyard all exhibited very similar scenery, there were still some distinctions between the tribal territories. Back when the Embryon had been the smallest of

the major tribes, their ramshackle hovel squirreled away amidst the ruins had been a rather fitting place for them, surrounded on all sides by war-torn battlefields that looked largely identical; it was less an intentional effort at camouflage and more that their hiding place amidst those ruins eventually came to be known as their hideout.

By contrast, a mid-sized tribe like the Maribel had the benefit of a base made of blemished through still upright buildings, surrounded by largely intact structures such as storehouses and garages within a perimeter of sturdy, defensible walls. The Solids' base had been even more properly developed, and that of the higher-ranking Wolves had been stronger still-- or at least, Serph thought it had been; it had been hard to tell, given its state of absolute ruin when he'd seen it.

The disconcerting reality was that Varin Omega's invisible Atma had the power to lay all that to waste in mere minutes. And yet, Serph reflected grimly, they knew very little about this enemy they were going to meet. He had revealed his astonishing speed, his power of invisibility, and his ability to fend off another High Atma with just one hand; they could only guess at what else he might be able to unleash against them.

"I see something," Lupa murmured, breaking a long silence. "Is that it?"

There was a rather unusual edifice ahead. Serph squinted dubiously.

"What the heck *is* that?" Heat said in a cautious whisper. "I've never seen a base that looked like that before. Did we get fed some false intel?"

"No, the coordinates match up," Argilla said as she checked her nav unit. "That's the Brutes' HQ all right-- but it doesn't look at all like it does in our earlier files."

That was for sure. It was unthinkable, from a military perspective, that the structure before them could serve as a base.

Out in front was an expansive garden, reminiscent of the ones at the Temple. A wide staircase led up to the massive door that was the front entrance, which was crowned by a stately stonework roof. There were no defensive barricades, and no one stood on guard outside the door. There were no lookout towers, no turrets or gun emplacements-- none of the defensive measures one would expect at the headquarters of a tribe the size of the Brutes.

Instead, there was a fragile, ornamental stone wall and a number of glass windows running around all four sides of the square building. It looked as though someone had rebuilt one of the countless ornate ruins that the team had passed on their way in. The roof was lined with a wavy, pale black building material that did not appear to be defensive in nature. At the base of the stairs bubbled a circular water fountain of indeterminate purpose; at its center stood a stone statue of a half-naked woman, holding some kind of vessel from which water poured in an apparently endless stream.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Jinana said. "It's like all of this was taken from someplace else entirely and just placed here. Look-- everything here is immaculate, despite the total devastation all around it."

Lupa had described how the Wolves and the Brutes had engaged one another in a number of fierce sorties, each repeatedly attempting to take the other's headquarters. The building they were

looking at now, however, bore no signs of any such battles having ever taken place. Indeed, it looked so new that it could well have been put up within the past hour. It hardly seemed real.

"Well, we're not going to accomplish anything by sitting here staring at it," Serph said. "Let's get moving. The enemy is probably waiting for us inside."

He had scarcely resumed walking towards the building when he felt an instinctual prickle of alarm.

From off in the distance came a high-pitched, nearly inaudible whine. Quickly, he rolled out of the way. Just beyond where he'd stood, an iron fence was blasted into rusty splinters. Serph transformed as he leapt up to his feet. As Varuna emerged from the halo of bluish light, he looked up into the sky, at the fluttering black silhouette in the distance, and let out a scream of rage.

A gruff voice laughed mockingly from somewhere nearby. "Welcome, Embryon. How'd you like that little greeting?" Serph's companions were quick to react and transform, and soon, the five High Atma-- now including Agni, Prithvi, Ushas and Cerberus-- stood at the ready in formation. Off to their right, from behind a large mountain of earth, stepped Mick the Slug, wearing a broad grin on his ugly face.

Agni growled in frustration. The fact that nobody had detected the enemy's presence wasn't only a sign of carelessness--it was almost unthinkable, given their abilities. Some twenty-odd Brute soldiers emerged behind the former Solids leader; their eyes were all darkened, sharing the same unsettling glimmer.

Mick's smile was one of utter satisfaction as he rubbed his fat hands together. "Before you get to see Varin-- oops, I mean the Colonel, of course-- you're gonna have a little fun with us."

"Where's Sera?" Varuna demanded. He searched his surroundings with care, but it looked like the Brutes gathered around Mick were the only enemies nearby. That was odd; the tribe ought to have been able to find much higher numbers. "And where are the rest of the Brutes?"

"The girl is with the Colonel, as you might expect. As for the others..." Mick raised his hands and gave a melodramatic shrug. "Well, the rest of us had to eat *something*, after all. We know how strong you are, and so we had to make sure we got a nice, hearty meal in ahead of time. It's not like weaklings like them were gonna be much use otherwise."

Both Cerberus and Ushas growled; neither would ever have cast aside a comrade for being weak, and the threat in their voices declared such an act as unforgivable.

"So you're the only ones left?" Prithvi said to Mick. "You're despicable." Her voice quavered with anger. "I can't stomach the thought of eating filth like you. Before we deal with Varin, I'm going to rip you to shreds and let the pieces rot."

"My. such thoughtful words!" Mick said, a more callous smile on his face now. He lifted up one hand. "But don't worry-- we'll be sure to eat our fill!"

Blue flames rose up all around. The Brutes who had devoured their own tribesmen roared as they rushed to attack-- a purple-skinned demon warrior; an odd-looking beast with a drooping belly and a long whip-like snout; a blue-furred, four-legged animal with feathery wings and the face of a man.

Lupa sprang into action. The blue quadruped came to meet him, leaping onto his back, but he shrugged it off and blasted it with Cerberus' flames. The creature let out a strained laugh as it used its wings to buffet the flames aside, then darted in to bite at Cerberus' throat. It missed, but managed instead to latch onto his shoulders. One of the High Atma's three heads bared its razor-sharp hands and sank them into the back of the man-faced beast. Blood flew as its wings were torn off.

The creature jumped backwards, brandishing its own scaly tails, each of which was tipped with a tiny, triangular head with a mouth full of needle-like teeth dripping poison. Rather than shirk back, however, Cerberus lunged forward, exposing himself to those glistening teeth. The long tails cracked like whips as they coiled around Cerberus' body, fangs poised to sink into his flesh. For a moment the beast's human face was triumph-- then the expression was swiftly replaced by one of alarm and fear. The needle-fangs snapped as they glanced off of Cerberus' thick pelt. The gunmetal canine pressed the counterattack with a tremendous gout of flame as his foe recoiled in pain and shock; moments later nothing was left of the blue beast but ash blowing away in the wind.

Varuna let out a cry of exultation as he cleaved the purple-skinned demon in twain, then whirled around to face a new enemy. A bizarre creature had come at him from behind; its body was a pasty white cylinder, and from its sides countless limbs with the pallor of a human corpse flailed about wildly. He dodged them all and struck home with an arm-blade, feeling the claylike consistency of the monster's flesh as the blade sank in. Rather than red blood, a sickly, yellow green liquid gushed forth, and the tube of flesh let out a cry like glass being dragged over glass. Its strange limbs grasped about uselessly for help that would not come. Its mouth was gaping wide, teeth on full display as it gasped once and then sank to the ground, giving a last pitiful whimper before going still, the reek of rotten flesh growing more prominent in the air.

Ushas moved with an elegant twirl, her dance a spiral of death for the foes around her. Her golden hair fanned out, becoming blazing-hot needles and piercing blades. From the flutter of her hips came a curved blade of light, slicing apart anything that it touched. A group of odd, hulking beasts with elongated fangs and long, tentacle-like noses tried to close in on her, but they were driven back snarling by her gleaming hair. Their beady eyes, devoid of pupils and sunken deep within cracked skin, smoldered with madness and rage.

They abandoned their advance on Ushas and chose Varuna as their new target. Kicking up billows of dust with their elephantine legs as they rushed towards him for the kill, they emitted long cries that sounded like warning sirens. Varuna kicked the corpse of the fleshy tube-creature away and swung his blade into a ready position as he faced his next foes.

"Serph!" It was Agni, hurling aside the blackened corpse of one of the long-nosed beasts as he rushed to Varuna's aid. Before he could reach his companion, however, a pair of dark wings swept between them.

An ear-piercing cackle split the air. "We meet again, Red," snickered Camazotz.

"Well if it isn't my escaped prey," Agni shot back.

Camazots cried out with glee as he grasped at Agni. Agni held him back with both hands as his twin heads belched out torrents of fire; but one of Camazotz's ultrasonic shrieks blasted away not only the rising spirals of flame, but a chunk of Agni's shoulder as well, sending up a spray of blood and flesh.

With another peal of mocking laughter, Camazotz rose high up into the sky, unleashing another barrage of sonic shockwaves along with a tremendous wind. Agni was stopped in his tracks by that wind, more blood streaming away from various spots all over his body; he hunkered down, covered his heads with his arms, and rooted himself in place. The roaring wind grew stronger still, breaking Agni's defensive stance by shear force and knocking him more and more off balance, leaving his vital spots open to attack.

A muffled growl rose up from his burly throats. He folded up his claws and used his arms like shields to protect his heads from the incoming ultrasonic blasts, but he could do little else. There was a ghoulish sound as the golden-colored armor that plated his upper arms was blasted clean off. His legs wavered, feet still dug into the ground.

As the sonic onslaught continued Agni's body teetered and he dropped to one knee. The flames that wreathed his claws flickered and diminished. The nasty gouge in his shoulder had grown, holes had been torn in his chest and abdomen. The flesh had been stripped from his left thigh, revealing white bone. His blood stained the ground for yards around where he knelt. Camazotz let out a cry of triumph and dove straight for him.

But as soon as those black wings were within arm's reach, Agni's smoldering claws twitched back to life. For an instant, Camazotz was stopped in midair as he was struck by a sudden updraft of searing heat, the emanation of Agni's murderous rage. Agni's two heads emerged suddenly from behind his claws, barely visible through a shimmering haze of intense heat.

The curtain of heat parted as Agni leapt upwards with a thunderous roar. Alarmed, Camazotz attempted to pull out of his dive, but Agni managed to catch onto him, sinking his claws into one of the bat-creature's short legs. Screaming in pain, Camazotz tried to shake free, but his struggling only made those claws sink deeper in, rending the flesh they clutched.

Even as he continued to bleed, Agni slowly but surely clambered his way up from Camazotz's legs to his back as his foe desperately flapped and fluttered. Camazotz cried out at the combination of pain and weight that assailed him, but his flagrant cursing was met only with the sight of Agni's two heads, both grinning wide with malice. Agni's shoulder--now moving freely--and his wounded arms and legs began to grow new flesh before Camazotz's eyes; the holes in his chest and belly had already vanished completely.

"Unhand me! Let me go, you bast--"

"Silence," Agni whispered into Camazot' ear, grasping his opponent's throat as they reeled through the air together. His muscular arm wrapped around Camazotz's neck and began to tighten, cutting off any further utterance of protest. "I'm sick of dealing with you. This time, you die."

Fire erupted from Agni's entire body. Engulfed in flames, Camazotz screeched in agony and spiraled through the air like a screaming fireball, leaving an ashen trail in his wake. He fired

sonic shockwaves haphazardly, blasting craters in the ground and pulverizing boulders into rubble. Several Atma battling below were reduced to a slurry of blood and gore. But Agni refused to let go; one of his heads threw itself back in laughter as the other bit down into his prey's smoldering shoulder.

Camazotz let out another scream.

"Jinana!" Prithvi cried out, ready to leap to Ushas' aid as one of the man-faced beast slipped past her deadly hair to attack her.

"Oh no you don't!" said a voice behind her. She felt a bone-wrenching pain as her arms were yanked behind her back and pinned into place, forcing her to cry out involuntarily. "I always thought you were a good girl. Won't you deal with me, first?"

Prithvi said nothing, instead focusing all of her effort into her gravity control powers in order to shove her enemy off of her back. She felt her arms slip free; but even as she turned to face her foe, she heard the sound of laughter quickly receding, the laughter finally settling in place atop a small, far-off hill.

Ushas came rushing to her side, having fought off the man-faced beast. "Argilla, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"What... What *is* that thing?" Argilla murmured through heavy, panting breaths.

Looking down at the battle from atop its distant vantage point, arms folded as it laughed and laughed, was a massive Atma, a good three times larger than normal-- Mick's Atma, Rahu, even bigger than it had been when they encountered it before, and oddly changed. Its form was metallic, and at first appeared to be more mechanical than alive; but when they looked more closely they could see that it was comprised of a series of separate slender bodies, stacked up like blue-black blocks of flesh. It had four arms and two legs sprouting from its new upper half, as well as a gaping mouth that divided its bizarre upper torso horizontally; whenever it smiled, a strand of drool dripped from its jagged teeth, and a waggling, wriggling, fleshy tongue curled about, mock-inviting.

"Oh, must you be so cold-hearted? Surely I don't deserve such disdain." Rahu's crude, guttural laugh made the very air shake. The upper part of his body detached itself from the lower part, floating up into the air and licking its lips ostentatiously before settling back into its original position. "C'mere, then. Let's play. I promise it'll be fun."

Prithvi howled with hatred as she backed away, conjuring a series of gravity orbs in both hands and hurling them in rapid succession. Rahu dodged them all, however, moving with a swiftness that belied his massive form; once or twice he dodged being hit by separating the upper half of his body from the lower, the two parts scampering in different directions before fusing back together. His grating laughter echoed all the while.

Prithvi was so focused on her enemy she lost her footing as she retreated, stumbling on uneven, crumbling ground. As she lost her balance and began to fall, a black shadow cast itself over her. Rahu's upper half had disengaged itself and lunged towards her, looking almost like a man jumping from the shoulder of giants.

Prithvi crouched, unable to recover in time; but she was suddenly shielded by a curtain of glimmering hair. The half of Rahu that had surged towards her was knocked back, crying out as if it had been trampled. Still in a daze, Prithvi felt herself grabbed by the shoulder and yanked back to her feet.

Panting, she slumped beside Ushas. "What's going on? Rahu wasn't like this before."

"He has eaten," Ushas whispered. Argilla could sense Jinana gritting her teeth, somewhere behind her Atma's glowing face. "It is as he said: not satisfied with merely the people of his own tribe, he helped himself to those of the tribe that took him in."

Prithvi turned her gaze back to her foe in shock and alarm. Rahu had once again joined the halves of his body; he let out a mighty guffaw. Even his morbidly obese human form was less hideous than this concatenation of grafted-together bluish-black flesh.

His tongue lolled out eagerly as he gazed at the two female Atma, and he smacked his lips as he called down to them. "You're not getting away from me this time!" Drool spilled from his tongue as he spoke. "I'm gonna have fun with you whether you like it or not, ladies. And then I'm gonna take my time and devour you nice and slow. I feel like I deserve that much for what you've done to me."

Prithvi and Ushas went into action simultaneously. Ushas used her hair to create a defense barrier, and Prithvi took up position behind it, focusing on distorting gravity to the full extent of her power. With an echoing laugh, Rahu rushed towards them, splitting himself in two, the upper half of his body launching itself up over Ushas' shield.

As the monstrosity leaped up toward them, Prithvi and Ushas were both struck by a tremendous disrupting force. Prithvi could sense that the gravity orb she'd hurled at Rahu's massive lower half had been canceled out by some type of gravity control of his own.

Not good...

Before she had the time to react to her realization, Prithvi felt a gravitational counter-attack coming at her, side-on. She conjured more energy of her own in an attempt to negate the strike, but misjudged her opponent's power; the resulting shockwave blew her off her feet, and she cried out in pain as she rolled across the hard ground. The earth around her then began to distort itself unsettlingly, buckling inward. Rahu continued to laugh, loud as ever.

"Argilla!" shouted Ushas, launching a volley of light blades in Rahu's direction.

"Oops!" Rahu chortled, splitting in two in order to avoid the attacks, both his halves flying high up before joining back together. More thick strands of saliva dangled down from his mouth as he kept on laughing.

Ushas scowled in frustration. Lifting the moaning Prithvi into her arms she leapt away from the hole that was opening beneath her; as she did she turned her hair into a gleaming spear that she launched at Rahu. Once again he split apart in an attempt to dodge it, but his bulky lower section was too slow, and the spear of light burned its way into his abdomen.

The hulking Atma's mouth twisted up in annoyance. His lower half fell to the ground, forcefully thrusting out both its fat arms beneath itself.

A mighty boom echoed through the air, the force of the impact shaking the ground enough to make Ushas stagger. As Rahu got back to his feet, cracks began to open in the ground, radiating swiftly from where he stood; several Atma battling nearby cried out as they were swallowed up by the earth. Ushas and Prithvi held onto one another, jumping away before one of those yawning chasms could claim them; they landed atop a storage container that had been unaffected by the shockwave.

"It can't be!" Prithvi said. "Since when does he have gravity control powers?"

"Did you think you were the only one who could do this, girl?" Rahu laughed, raising his hands up high. "I ate myself sick to make sure I was ready for the big day today--more than enough, as it turned out. Behold!"

Once more, the huge pair of arms attached to the massive lower section of his body smashed down against the ground, creating tremors so intense that it seemed the whole world shook. More fissures spread, leaving a number of Brutes to cling desperately to the rocky outcroppings before they ultimately fell screaming into the abyss. The cargo container began to tilt, sliding towards a crevasse.

Ushas once again held tight to her friend and tried to leap away, but her foot slipped on the metal plating as it slanted. Another smattering of humans and abominations alike fell into the enormous crack; Ushas, still holding Prithvi close, would have been next, but at the last possible moment, Prithvi shot out her arms, which stretched out like uncoiled springs. Her claws caught the edge of the fissure, and the pair hung there above the abyss.

"Argilla, let me go!" Ushas said, panting. "You'll be able to climb out more easily on your own if you--"

"Not on my watch!" Prithvi shot back, straining just as hard to breathe. Her arms were elongated to their very limit; slowly painfully, she began to reel herself and her friend back upward, fighting Rahu's powerful gravitational influence. Her bones creaked and strained with the effort as she struggled slowly upward.

She had just pulled them high enough to see up past the edge of the fissure when a massive shadow lumbered into view obscuring the glow of the magenta sky. "Finally made it up. That's a relief," a deep voice chuckled. Prithvi felt her claws prised free of the outcropping. A moment later she found herself dangling by both arms, each held in one of Rahu's uppermost hands. His middle arms seized her legs, while his massive lower arms grabbed Ushas, pinioning her wrist and braided hair in a single huge hand, her ankles in another.

Holding the two female Atma up high, Rahu bellowed with laughter. "Heheh, gotcha!" His thick, pink tongue slid out to lather his face with spittle. Prithvi looked away in disgust.

Rahu snorted. "A prideful woman to the last. No matter; this is the end for you."

Ushas struggled with all her might, but with her hands and feet--along with her hair, her primary weapon-- constrained as they were, it was no use; she couldn't even flutter the pleats at her hips enough to cast off a sickle of light. She bared her fangs in defiance as her captor's enormous mouth exhaled rank breath in her face.

"It's no use begging or pleading; I'm going to eat the both of you, whether you like it or--"

Rahu was cut off mid-sentence by a sudden gust of chilling air that descended upon him from behind, freezing his torso. He chirruped like a broken flute as his prey fell from his hands. Ushas and Prithvi were quick to roll away from their hulking foe.

There, with blades extended from both his arms and his teeth bared in rage and the exultation of battle, stood Varuna, white frost blanketing his body with fragments of ice as adornments.

Prithvi's eyes lit up. "Sir!"

"Serph!" Ushas called out.

Varuna rushed towards Rahu as the latter scrabbled to recover, clawing at his frosted body. Shaking off the remainder of the ice that clung to him, Rahu once again slammed his arms into the ground, splitting the earth with a booming crack. Varuna sprinted like a whirlwind across the ground as it buckled and collapsed beneath his feet, vaulting over the gravity orbs that the flabbergasted Rahu hurled indiscriminately in his direction. With a single bound he soared high above his foe, uttering a roar of challenge.

Seeing his enemy rapidly drawing closer, Rahu tried again to strike him with a gravity sphere, but his aim was off. The orb went wide, smashing into a pile of corpses and sending up a spray of blood. With Ushas holding her up, Prithvi launched a gravity orb of her own, striking Rahu in the side. A trail of ice crystals glittered behind Varuna like a comet as he descended, both blades aimed for the upper torso of Rahu's two-part body.

Rahu let out a pitiful cry and made a break for it. He separated his oversized self in two, dodging quickly to the left and right; the maneuver threw off Varuna's aim, but one downward slice still struck home, lopping off one of Rahu's scrawny upper arms. Varuna spun in a circle with the momentum of the blade's follow-through, bluish black blood splattering the ground in his wake.

"You bastard!" Rahu croaked. "All those soldiers--"

"--Are dead by my hand," Varuna finished. "And you're next, Rahu-- or should I say Mick the Slug?"

As the two faced off, there came a blood curdling scream from above as the broken and battered form of Camazotz hurtled to the ground nearby, Agni landing heavily on top of him. The bat-Atma writhed feebly beneath the feet of his fiery antagonist. His once-mighty black wings had been largely burned away; one of his ears had been ripped off, leaving nothing but a bloody hole in its place, and his jaw had been torn and dislocated, leaving it to dangle, still connected by only a few strands of flesh.

Agni threw his heads back in laughter, and with obvious glee proceeded to use his claws--so soaked in gore that they were as red as the rest of him--to gut his foe from chest to belly in the span of a single breath. He quivered with pleasure as his foe's blood drenched him, relishing it with a mighty roar. By now, Camazotz resembled little more than a tattered old rag made of bloody meat. He let out high-pitched, mewling cries and batted his ruined wings about, but as far as the sturdy crimson form of Agni was concerned, his foe might as well have been conjuring up a gentle, soothing breeze.

"Filth," Agni sputtered, sounding almost drunk. He leaned down to chomp onto the squirming Camazotz's throat, and then thrashed his head about from side to side as he tore into the flesh there, gobbling it up. Desperate screams turned into muffled, wet gasping sounds.

Cerberus came bounding up from the far side of the battlefield, prostrating his canine form as if in greeting. From one of his three mouths dangled the lifeless corpse of one of the long-nosed demons, its windpipe crushed between those powerful jaws. With a growl he tossed the body aside. Agni twisted his twin mouths into a pair of matching smiles, and slammed the black carcass he held against the ground once more for good measure.

Only six combatants remained standing on the battlefield now-- Varuna, Agni, Prithvi, Cerberus, Ushas, and Rahu. The remaining Atma were all strewn about in various postures of defeat. Those that could still breathe were groaning and crying out for help, or else simply whimpering in pain; the vast majority, however, had gone completely still. Many had been battered to the point of unrecognizability, torn to shreds or burned to mounds of ash. The ground was painted with blood and other bodily fluids, in a nauseating variety of different colors, forming rivulets that reeked of slaughter.

Varuna advanced slowly toward the allies' one remaining foe. Agni, still laughing, followed suit. Prithvi, Ushas, and Cerberus moved to cut off any escape route. Rahu tried to back away. Gone were any signs of his previous bombast; now he hunched fearfully, his remaining upper arms held up defensively. His big mouth twisted up sheepishly. "Whoat, h-hey, let's not get hasty, yeah? Let's talk this out. I mean it's not like I did this because I wanted to. I was just looking out for myself, trying to survive. That Varin, he's a real nutcase, y'know? Can't reason with him."

"Silence!" Cerberus said, lashing his tail. "No more excuses from you."

"Oh, come on. Have a heart!" Rahu pleaded. Then abruptly he leapt high into the air, just avoiding a blast of Agni's flames. With a booming laughter, the hulking armored Atma swung his lower arms wide.

"You asked for it, then!" he roared between gasps of near-delirious laughter. "You left me desperate! Now you're all gonna die! I'm going to obliterate you!"

"Fan out!" Varuna shouted. He and Ushas darted in opposite directions, while the slower Prithvi and Agni clung to Cerberus as he leapt into the air. A moment later, a truly enormous crack split the ground, engulfing the corpses of the fallen Brutes in a cascade of rubble and shards of broken earth.

Twirling her way to the top of a tall, ruined building, Ushas gathered her deadly golden hair into a single, fearsome blade; then she turned and rushed at Rahu. Still laughing maniacally, Rahu managed to seize her hair-blade before it could strike him; he yanked her off balance and lifted his fist. Ushas staggered-- but before she could fall, her hair was cut by a streak of fire, and then came Cerberus growling as he sprang at Rahu, flames of hatred radiating from his entire body. Rahu teetered backward as he took the full brunt of the massive canine's body rush.

"Serph! Heat!" Cerberus called out, still pressing his fiery weight against Rahu. Varuna and Agni rushed to join him, the former unleashing a torrent of ice-cold, slashing rain, the latter a veritable whirlwind of fire-wreathed claws. Rahu screamed and shook as he tried to fend them

off. Clouds of steam billowed up as a frigid cold mixed with fiery heat. The very air was distorted by the varying extremes of temperature. The corpses of a nearby soldier took a direct hit from a fireball and was vaporized instantly. Fragments of rubble became so chilled that they split apart into fragments of ice.

The trembling Rahu unleashed a massive gravity wave. In response, Prithvi quickly activated her own gravity control. The two gravitational distortions collided, pressed together, and annihilated one another. Space itself began to warp, creating a lensing effect that caused a tall ruin many yards away to warp, waver, and cacophonously crash down.

Prithvi gritted her teeth, calling upon all the power she could muster, destroying the equilibrium between the two gravitational forces. Rahu's gravity wave was bounced right back at him, engulfing his enormous body; he plunged into the earth as if he'd been struck with a titanic hammer, then sank further still, a plume of dust rising as he did.

Trapped in the ground, Rahu cursed with fury and fought to free himself, bits of rubble and dust whirled in orbit around him as he began to rise back up. His blue hands clutched at the edge of the pit, and his head rose slowly, sputtering wordlessly as he wriggled his way up.

Before he could free his bulk entirely, Cerberus rushed at him. One of the great hound's heads belched fire as the other two bit down onto Rahu's arms, immobilizing him before he could unleash another gravity wave. The pair grappled ferociously.

Light bathed the battlefield as Ushas approached. Wielding a blade of light in both hands, and swinging her hair in the form of a single spear, she hopped up onto Cerberus' nack and then leapt down towards Rahu; the massive Atma tried to avoid her, but Cerberus' three mouths held him solidly in place. With a cry of triumph Ushas pierced him through the head with both the blade of light and the gleaming spear.

The enormous Atma writhed, still clinging to life despite the fact that his skull had been transfixed. He tore his thick arms free from Cerberus' jaws and slammed them into the ground; the earth began to collapse around him, forming dozens of craters. Cerberus tried to seize his arms again, but was struck by a powerful blast that knocked him back out of range. Varuna and Agni rushed to his side.

"He's grown weaker," the hound-Atma said, shaking his heads. "End him."

Rahu had lumbered back to the surface now. Ushas' onslaught had done him grave injury, but apparently not enough to finish him off. He strode forward, droning incomprehensibly, the ground buckling around him with every step he took.

Varuna and Agni dove away from the collapsing earth, the two Atma sailing over Rahu's enormous head. The giant turned his head this way and that in apparent panic, evidently no longer able to see. Varuna and Agni hardly needed to look at each other in order to act in concert; Varuna thrust his arms straight down with all his might, while Agni conjuring two fireballs larger than his own heads within his open palms.

They struck Rahu at the same time, with scorching heat and freezing cold. His hard skin began to bubble and melt, giving off a foul stench as it dripped onto the ground. The pallid flesh underneath began to split and boil, vanishing into vapor. Rahu staggered and fell back into one of

the craters of his own making. Shards of ice and flecks of fire whirled around him. Varuna and Agni followed him, picking their way down one side of the pit.

Rahu's upper half let out a pitiful squeal and made a run for it. His lower body, no longer under control, collapsed to one knee. The other five High Atma concentrated their attacks. The lower body was frozen, scorched, pierced, and slashed to ribbons, soon reduced to a deformed clump of blue-black meat. The upper half let out an even higher-pitched cry as it crawled away.

Varuna and Agni went to follow after it, but they were threatened by a barrage of lightning bolts that came streaking down from the heavens. Rahu's upper body was gesticulating with its remaining arms; this, then, was another of its powers. White spheres of pure electricity skittered along the ground, threatening to knock back anyone who dared approach.

But this last-ditch defense was far from sufficient to stall the combined attack of two High Atma. Agni unleashed a mighty, echoing roar. He batted away an incoming ball of electricity with a swipe of his arm, then stabbed his claws into the now much smaller Rahu's scrawny shoulder. Bodily fluids boiled forth from within. As Rahu twisted and writhed, Varuna's blades of ice came hurtling from the other side, the sub-zero tines stabbing deep into his exposed flank. In a last, desperate attempt to flee from the two-pronged attack, Rahu drew in his long, gangly legs, and jumped for all he was worth.

The moment he landed, however, he found a new foe to contend with. His trembling arms and legs scrabbled at the ground, but no matter how hard he tried to jump away, he found himself stuck firmly in place. "Looks like it was your lower body that had control over gravity," said Prithvi, whipping her long arms about menacingly as she approached. "You're not getting away this time. You're going to suffer like all those people of yours that you used."

"W-Wait, hold on, please!" Rahu pleaded. He'd been reduced from a menacing brute to little more than a head sliding along the ground. "Please, I'm begging you! Just wait up!"

"I'm through with your excuses." The ground beneath Rahu's crawling form began to buckle inward. Rahu squirmed and groaned. Blue blood dribbled from between his fangs. Various cracking and popping sounds came from within his body.

Rahu made a retching sound as his head snapped back, and his limbs shot out, rigid; then his movements ceased altogether.

Still Prithvi continued to apply gravitational pressure, glaring fiercely at her fallen foe. She gave a small start when Varuna approached and set a hand on her shoulder. "Argilla, that's enough," Serph said, changing back into human form. "It's over. Now we just need to face Varin. We'll fight him, we'll beat him, and then we'll get Sera back. Then we can go back to headquarters. Back home."

"Home..."

"Yes. Our home," Serph said firmly. "That's what Sera called it: our 'home,' where all our friends are."

"Home," Prithvi muttered to herself once more as she was bathed in blue light, returning to the pink-haired form of Argilla, looking somewhat crestfallen. "You're right, sir. We came here for her-- for Sera. We don't have time to waste on anything or anyone else."

"Exactly. Come on, everyone. Let's get going." Serph looked back at his companions, all of whom had resumed human form. "Time is of the essence. We have to save our friend."

Some minutes after Serph and his companions departed, there was a faint movement on the desolate battlefield.

"Damn... those... bastards..."

It was Bat- no, Camazotz.

Thanks to the countless Atma he had devoured, there was still a spark of life within him, though his body had been ravaged almost beyond recognition by Agni's claws. He dragged himself out of the thick pool of his own blood that had gathered around him, continuing to curse all the while.

"They'll all pay for this-- they'll see. I have played the fool for the last time. The Embryon will rue the day."

As he crawled he trailed his own internal organs behind him, caked in mud and grime. Every time he hooked his twisted claws into the ground and dragged himself further, he let out a groan. His wings, stripped down to the bone, flapped weakly, but they were no longer capable of flight; even with an Atma's regenerative capabilities, he would be hard pressed to survive.

"Damn them! Damn them all... They'll pay... I'll devour them, each and every one..."

"Then you'll have to let me devour you," said a raspy voice.

Camazotz turned his head in time to see a pair of spindly arms reach from a nearby pit and grab him by the legs.

"Well, looks we got our asses handed to us pretty good, didn't we? My bad." The words held a hint of amusement, crude yet coy.

"Mick!" Camazotz choked from his blood-filled mouth. There was a note of fear in his voice that had been absent during his battle with Agni. "Y-You're still alive?"

"Yeah. But with my lower body killed off, I won't be for long." Rahu's upper body half crawled into view. "You'll let me eat you, right, Bat? Old pal? You're not gonna last much longer in your present state. But if I devour you, we can both get our revenge--together as one. Whaddya say, Bat?"

The distorted creature drew itself closer, like someone dragging a waterlogged sack along the ground. His shoulder bore deep, brutal gashes, and his arms and midsection had been mangled beyond belief. He left a trail of blue blood along the jagged ground in his wake. Although half of his oversized mouth had been torn off, he still somehow managed a grotesque smile.

"Neither of us has long to live. We gotta come together. I'd be... much obliged if I could eat you. It'll be fine. When I finally beat that fucking silver haired brat, he'll see that even you *dying* didn't kill you. C'mon, Bat. Don't that sound good?"

"No way. You're out of your goddamn mind. Get the hell away from me!" Camazotz struggled for all he was worth, but he was the weaker of the two. Desperately beating the scorched remnants of his wings, he managed to get airborne for the briefest of moments; then the ruined membranes crumbled to ash and long arms dragged him back to the ground.

Camazotz's claws dug into the earth, leaving furrows in the ground as his squirming form was dragged backward. He screamed once more, but that scream was muffled by a long fingered hand clamped over his snout.

Slowly but surely, the bat-Atma's blackened form was dragged into the pit. Soon after, the faint sound of dying cries emerged from the hole, along with the snapping of bones and the wet slurp of raw meat being chewed.

It was oddly silent inside the base.

As he took his first step inside, Serph felt his feet sink into some sort of thick, red cloth. At first he panicked, assuming it must be some kind of trap, and he tried to pull away-- but his fears were unfounded; his feet moved easily on the soft surface. The broad, thick band of fabric ran the full length of the hallway, from the entry door to the staircare opposite, and from there continued up to the second floor.

Overhead hung a light fixture, adorned with strange ornamentations that served no apparent useful purpose. The light source was formed of transparent glass, with many additional pieces of class cut into complex shapes that hung along with it, scattering the brilliant light. The lamp itself was a dull golden color, the likes of which Serph had never seen. It was shaped into a mind-boggling series of decorative twists and curves.

"What are those weird things standing over there?" Argilla said in a hushed tone. "Not some kind of defense system... I don't think."

On either side of the staircase stood a pair of nude figures, reminiscent of the stone woman in the fountain outside. They were wrapped in cloth from the waist down, and they gave off no hostile intent, nor were they armed.

"You have come at last, puppets," declared a booming voice. The assembled team quickly adopted defensive stances. "You needn't worry; it's just me here, now, alone. Mick and Bat failed, then? It's just as well. I'd rather not have any more filthy puppets in my mansion than you lot, anyway."

"Varin!" Serph called out as he transformed, the action swift and reflexive. "Have you devoured what was left of your soldiers-- your own men, your friends?"

"I am not Varin-- I am a Colonel!" The voice resounded like thunder in the enclosed space, and Argilla gasped and covered her ears. Heat and Lupa both growled as they transformed into Agni and Cerberus. "Do not lump me in with the likes of you, puppet. --Now, gather yourselves together and come to me. And then I will show you the pain of being eaten alive as vividly as I have felt it. You know what will happen to the girl if you refuse."

"Give Sera back to us, Varin Omega!" shouted Argilla, now in the form of Prithvi.

But there was no response. The room had returned to its previous, eerie silence.

"Varin Omega," Serph muttered to himself, unfurling Varuna's deadly blades from both arms.

More strange details were apparent as the group made its way up the stairs and along the second-floor hallway of the peculiar building.

The fabric along the floor appeared to have been laid down everywhere. There were rows of rooms on either side, the doors to which were made of an unusual mottled brown substance, hard and stiff, yet still flimsy enough to be easily damaged by any solid object. The door handles appeared to be made of metal, but upon closer inspection seemed to be some less sturdy material with merely metallic coating. There were no signs of any defensive measures to protect against enemy incursion- no bulkheads or barriers, no stations for guards on patrol-- nothing.

"Is he trying to bait us?" Heat snarled. "What's the deal with these flimsy defenses? Look at this." He turned to a nearby door, smashing it in with his fist. The door panel disintegrated into splinters, allowing a glimpse of the chamber beyond.

The room he had revealed was large and dim, with a faint, sooty, rotten scent lingering in the air. There was a pair of remarkably large chairs made of the same material as the door, along with a desk against a window. There was a sort of ash-caked alcove set within wall, within which was a small heap of burnt cinders. Against another wall was a cabinet; along its top was a row of what appeared to be thick, bound tomes with writing along the spine.

Serph ran his hand along the books, then picked one out and looked at the title. *The Merchant of Venice*. Inside were written a whole slew of conversations between various different men and women. The language was peculiar, and hard to understand; Serph flipped through the pages, baffled. He saw obscure arguments, and a reference to someone cutting out a pound of someone else's flesh.

"None of this makes any sense," Cerberus said; had he been in his human form, he'd likely have quirked an eyebrow. "I've never seen anything like any of this in the Junkyard. It's all... trinkets. No use to anyone in a fight-- or even related to fighting at all."

"We can find out more when we find Varin," Serph said. He shared Lupa's unease. What made him most uncomfortable, was the inexplicable inkling that he recognized these strange items from somewhere. It was the exact feeling he'd felt the first time he'd laid eyes on Sera-- that certainty that he'd met her somewhere before.

They left the room and continued along the corridor, making their way up to the third floor.

The doors along the way were all locked; occasionally, Heat would smash one of them open in frustration, but they never found anyone on the other side, nor any trace of either Sera or Varin Omega. Following the lush, red fabric along the floor, they eventually arrived at a massive set of double doors at the end of the hallway. They could go no farther without going through.

"Varin must be waiting for us in here," Serph said.

"Yeah," Lupa agreed. "Everyone, be on your guard." As the swiftest and best-armored among them, Cerberus took the lead, approaching step by cautious step. They hadn't been attacked by any of Varin's men on their way through the base, as their enemy had promised, but denizens of the Junkyard could never hope to eliminate their sense of caution.

Carefully they made their way up to the twin doors, heads turned and ears straining to hear. No sound came from beyond the other side, and there was no sign that anyone waited beyond; nevertheless, they guessed that their goal lay ahead.

Serph gestured for Prithvi to take up a position on the right side of the door, and Ushas to the left. He then lined up with Agni behind Cerberus.

Varin would likely come at them in the form of his invisible Atma. The plan, as the team had discussed it previously, was for Varuna, Agni and Cerberus to do their best to hold off his attack-- which could come from anywhere-- Prithvi and Ushas rushed to grab Sera.

"I'm opening the door," Heat said in a barely audible whisper. The others nodded.

Agni's broad arm burst into flames, and he reduced the door to smoldering splinters as easily as if it were made of paper. The interior of the room was visible now: an incredibly large circular chamber, with wide pillars set in ornamental alcoves at regularly spaced intervals. There was a high, dome-shaped ceiling with handrail running around its circumference. Light from the magenta sky outside streamed in through glass windows; the floor was made of polished stone, and a series of lamps along the walls shone with an unusual brilliance.

Sera lay face-down in a heap on the bare floor, as if unconscious-- but at the noise of Serph and the others barging in, her head snapped up.

There was a momentarily look of joy on her face that was quickly replaced by a fearful pallor. Argilla rushed towards her, calling out her name.

"Argilla, no!" the girl shouted. "Get out of here!"

Before the words were all the way out of Sera's mouth, Prithvi was blasted against the wall by what seemed to be a sudden gust of wind. Cracks split the smooth stone paneling where she struck, and Prithvi let out a cry of pain and collapsed to the floor. As she tried to get back to her feet, an unseen hand wrapped around her throat and hefted her into the air.

"Haven't you learned anything, you Italian bitch?" a voice mocked. Her attacker was still nowhere to be seen. "The wait has been unbearable. --I'm going to kill your precious little 'friends' one by one, Shin Minase, before eating you slowly. You're going to pay for defying me, you *brat*!"

"N-Nothing you say... makes any sense," Prithvi managed to choke out. She extended one of her dangling arms into a whip shape, swiping her claws at an unseen foe. But her attack swung through empty air, and she was promptly hurled to the floor with a tremendous force. Her body twisted up in pain. For a moment, Prithvi's countenance flickered, revealing Argilla's face underneath; but her eyes worked themselves back open and she regained her composure. "Let Sera go," she demanded. "You're a coward, hiding behind an innocent girl as a shield."

"'Innocent?' How can you still say that after hearing what she's done?"

Serph and the others were all in the room by now, encircling Argilla to keep her safe, but could not pinpoint their invisible opponent. They tried to track the source of his voice, but with every word, his position shifted, making his movements impossible to predict; and they knew that if they simply unleashed their attacks haphazardly, there was too great a risk of Sera getting caught in the crossfire. The girl's eyes had already glassed over with panic.

"God, just looking at you all is enough to make me laugh. It's almost sad, really."

"What are you talking about?" Serph snapped, both of his arm blades at the ready as the taunting voice echoed from every direction.

"What am I talking about? Ha!" The triumphant laughter continued. "To think that you would be the one to ask me that, when you were supposed to be the goddess's favorite. Have you forgotten that it's the girl's fault that you've been cursed with that hideous form and cast down into this place?"

Serph's gaze darted over to Sera. She curled herself into a ball, shaking her head back and forth over and over in denial. "I don't know," she cried out plaintively. "Serph, I don't know-- who I am, what I did to everyone. I... I came to save... to save everyone--"

"Save?" The laughter was so loud now that it distorted the very air. "What is there for you to save, when you're the one who sent them all here in the first place? You should have just gone along with what we wanted, and been an obedient little tool. Instead, your very *existence* ruined everything. And now you talk about saving people? Don't make me laugh! You're no goddess-- you're the Devil, you damned Technoshaman!"

The last word made Sera reel as if she'd been shot. Cerberus, who had hitherto remained still and silent, ears cocked and keen eyes searching, suddenly began to quake; all three of his mouths opened at once, and a veritable inferno blazed forth, the attack concentrated on a single point in the chamber. There came a terrific scream. Varin's grandstanding was cut off, and his massive silhouette was briefly visible as a blur within the roar of flames.

"Jinana!" Serph exclaimed. Ushas was already in motion. She cleared the hall in a single leap, gathering up Sera's cowering form into her arms. As she did, she fanned out her hair, forming a nigh impenetrable barrier around the two of them. Invisible or not, there was no way another Atma was going to break through the tightly knit defenses.

"Damn you!" Varin bellowed. He was outlined now by the flickering vestiges of those flames, an oily, burning sheen that clung to him as he moved. It would die out in time, leaving him invisible once more, but for now his body was unmistakably highlighted by a thin mantle of fire.

"I let him keep talking, and extrapolated his movements based on the echoing of his voice," Cerberus said, responding to Varuna's unasked question. "Now brace yourselves-- here he comes!"

"I am going to slaughter and devour every last one of you," Varin seethed. Gone was the theatrical gloating tone he used before; now there was an unnerving note of madness in his words. "You all shoulder the same guilt. So die-- die here together in this hell!"

He spat the words with an angry roar. The air in the room seemed to shudder, and everything went utterly, blindingly white/ Countless orbs of electricity and bolts of lightning zigzagged from every direction, forming a mesh that separated all of them from one another, then sent them sprawling with a burst of intense pressure.

Varuna's blood sprayed as he was hurled forcibly into Agni, the two of them crumpling together in a heap against the wall. White-hot bands of electric energy wrapped around them, searing their flesh. Agni snarled and thrashed about, but his hands and mouths alike were held

immobile by that net of lightning. Varuna was likewise unable to lift his already extended blades, forced to endure the sound and stench of his own flesh burning.

"Serph!" Ushas cried, still holding on to Sera. It was clearly taking all of her effort just to maintain her defensive barrier as she clutched the girl close.

Prithvi stood nearby, desperately trying to bat away the barrage of electrical spheres coming her way, but the expanding net of lightning trapped her long arms and pinned them to the floor. Ushas tried to extend her hair in an attempt to include her friend within her defensive shield, but her effort was in vain; the bolts of electricity were able to make their way through even the smallest of gaps.

Only Cerberus remained standing-- but his body was wholly surrounded by the electric mesh and the swarming balls of lightning. His form was bathed in white luminescence, his muted, angry growling all but drowned out by the droning buzz of electricity.

The three-headed beast tried to force his way forward anyway, only to be struck a mighty blow by an unseen arm, his large body leaving a trail of fiery sparks as he sailed through the air. He crashed through one of the pillars at the side of the room, shattering several of the lights that hung there.

With a pained roar he reappeared from the billow of dust, hackles raised as he shook off the electrical discharges. One of his three heads hung limp, its skull partially caved in. There were deep gashes in his side from which dangled thin strands of black blood, and when he shook his head, blood and scraps of flesh splattered the nearby area.

One of his mouths opened to expel his flaming breath, but it was immediately clapped shut by an invisible hand, preventing the attack. Tiny tongues of flame fell as droplets from between his sharp teeth.

"You're first." Serph and the others could only watch helplessly as Cerberus was lifted by his muzzle, his four limbs pawing uselessly at the empty air. "I guess caving in one of your skulls didn't teach you a lesson. Maybe I should tear one of them off, as well."

Cerberus' largest, central head made a disconcerting sound as its neck was twisted. Sera covered up her face, unable to bear the horror.

"*Stop it*!" she shouted.

The sound of her voice was not especially lous; yet somehow it subsumed the crackling buzz of Varin's lethal energy and killed the glowing light. As if switched off, the net of electricity and balls of lightning instantly dispersed as well. For one brief moment, a giant form nearly as tall as the dome itself was clearly visible, his head wobbling in surprised.

Cerberus growled, shaking away the last bits of electricity that clung to him before his intact secondary head snapped sideways, biting into the giant's hand and severing it at the wrist. It fell to the floor, freeing Cerberus' middle head. Kicking off of his opponent's abdomen, the canine backflipped through the air; as he landed he unleashed his pent-up hellfire as a single, mighty burst. Now it was the red glow of fire that painted the room.

Varin Omega howled with rage. Sera gasped and pressed herself more tightly against Ushas' chest. A hail of sparks scattered against one side of the defensive barrier. Then a gravity orb

came hurtling towards the towering enemy; the scorched floor buckled and he lurched sideways, his spark-blast veering off target.

Prithvi got to her feet, one arm dragging along the floor, the other held high and clutching another gravity orb. She bared her teeth, letting out an intimidating shriek of alarm as she hurled the sphere right at her enemy. Sputtering with fury, Varin Omega raised up both arms to unleash his lightning again; before he could complete the movement, however, his limbs froze in place.

Sera's eyes were wide open now and she glared right at him. Her tiny, pale face had grown steely, devoid of any emotion. Varin Omega's form was reflected in her eyes, which shone in a strange and potent light. It seemed to the companion's amazement that her gaze was binding him in place. Space began to distort awkwardly around him, much as it had when Sera had escaped Bat's grasping claws.

"You little *witch*!" For an instant, Varin Omega's entire body was clearly visible, radiating utter hatred. Shaking off his brief paralysis, he loomed above his foes, looking as though he might pierce the dome of the ceiling. He reached for the girl in Ushas' arms, still fighting to fully wrest himself from her gaze, but before his flickering fingertips could reach their target, a pair of Atma--silver blue and crimson red-- interposed themselves between him and Ushas.

Varuna and Agni.

Agni's body bore deep gashes from the burning electrical mesh, and some of his armor had been seared clean off, but he hadn't lost any of his fierce fighting spirit. Grabbing onto Varin's barely visible arms, the fiery Atma plunged his burning claws into his foe's torso. Oily-thick blood sprouted forth, making their huge foe somewhat more visible. Staggering, Varin Omega tried to shift out of sight again. As he did he unleashed a tremendous kick.

Agni's body buckled at the impact, and he sailed back through the air-- but before he slammed into the wall, Cerberus darted in, catching him against his side. Getting back to his feet, Agni exchanged glances with Cerberus' wounded head, which was starting to regenerate from the crushing wound it had received. They smiled at one another, and then turned to unleash their flames as one.

The mighty titan could not hide his form amidst the torrent of roaring fire that raged in a whirlwind around him, and Varuna seized the opportunity to strike. A pair of blades, wreathed in an icy chill, penetrated the wall of flame, aiming for Varin's throat. They missed the mark ever so slightly, sinking instead into the crook of his neck. Chilling frost bloomed on the giant's skin.

Varin Omega thrashed his head in dismay and jumped out of reach. Varuna tried to pursue him, but was met with a punch that slammed his head into the floor; in an instant it was his foe that was on the attack, lifting his huge foot to trample Varuna's skull. But Cerberus rushed forward, his steel-furred frame a rocket of blazing metal, and knocking him backwards, diverting the crippling blow.

Agni's body shook as he poured out a stream of fire, which Varin tried to counter with a burst of electricity. The two powers collided, each deflecting the other. Ushas' hair and Prithvi gravity orbs ensured that the scattered electrical bursts were dispersed before they could get close to Sera.

The girl was twisting in Ushas' arms. "Sera," the Atma said admonishingly, "you must keep still. Keep your head down. This isn't something you want to see."

"I do want to see it-- no, I *have* to see it." Sera's voice was faint, but determined. "I came here to save all of you. I can't let myself be afraid of something like this. I'm your friend-- and a member of the Embryon." Lifting her face again, she looked, trembling, out at the scene before her. Varin had faded from sight again. Now through a curtain of glimmering hair, the girl watched as an invisible enemy engaged her friends in a pitched battle; all the while, her black eyes smoldered with a strange, burning glow.

"Jinana," Sera said in a reedy whisper after several long moments. "Varin, I-- I can tell where he is."

"You what?" Ushas hissed.

Sera spoke with assurance. "I can't see him; I just know. I can feel it. He's... right now he's moving along the wall to the right." She broke into a cry of warning. "Serph, look out!"

Varuna was still reeling from the blow to his head, still trying to get his focus clear. At the sound of Sera's words his body moved on pure reflex, one of his blades thrusting sharply upwards.

Against his expectations, he felt resistance. There was the familiar sensation of his blade sinking deep into a living foe, and then a scream as the blood sprayed over him. Agni sprang into action beside him, thrusting with his claws at the same location and digging out a swath of invisible flesh. Now the screaming was accompanied by the reek of burning flesh, and another phantom gush of blood.

"H-How?" came a voice through gritted teeth. "How did you know?"

"Up! He went up!" Sera shouted, rattling her words off rapid-fire. "He's gone up to the terrace-- up by the ceiling-- he's trying to get the jump on Lupa from above!"

"Bitch!" The word was a roar that shook the room. Sera shrieked and curled herself closer to Ushas, even as the golden Atma's hair bundled itself into a single long spear that jabbed up towards the ceiling dome.

There was a dull thud, and the translucent form of the giant appeared more clearly than it had before, impaled by Ushas' blazing spear. An indistinct mouth hung open, blood dripping from within; the blood lost its transparency, forming a dusky puddle where it splattered on the ground.

Ushas pulled her spear free, quickly reforming the protective barrier around Sera; as she did, Varuna dashed forwards with blades at the ready, springing toward the wavering silhouette that was already starting to disappear again. He made grazing contact, oily blood streaking through the air, then crouched down low, seeking his quarry again.

"Not there. He isn't behind Serph anymore," Sera said, her voice ringing with resolve. "He's circling around the wall, counterclockwise. Now he's off to Jinana's right, in front of her-- underneath the lamp. Jinana, look ou--!"

An enraged yell drowned out Sera's cry of warning. A pale shadow leapt out from the wall and impacted Ushas' defensive shield, which was momentarily outlined in a shower of sparks. For a

moment the glossy, titanic outline forced the barrier inward; then, repulsed, it rose up and began to slip away.

Cerberus darted forward, wreathed from nose to tail in a corona of fire, and slammed into the hulking shadow. The giant tried to ward off the impact with one hand, only to find that it was bound in place by a gravitational vortex. As he tried in vain to wrest it free, Prithvi threw her head back with a feral hiss. The floor under Varin Omega's feet began to shift and gape.

"Oh, you little Italian wench! I'm--" Once more, Varin's words turned into a bloodcurdling scream of pain. With his foe immobilized, Varuna had thrust one of his blades in with all his might, sinking half its length into the half-visible torso.

The giant's silhouette flickered, becoming still more distinct. Blood dripped to the floor at his feet. Varuna readied another attack, but was taken off balance as a translucent hand reached down, gripped the first blade, and pulled it free with a low growl. "Don't underestimate me, boy!"

Suddenly Varuna found himself sailing upward. He struck the ceiling back-first, hard.

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the chamber. Varuna felt something lukewarm well up in his throat. He realized in shock that knife-like shards of broken glass had pierced him through-- in through his back and out his stomach, through his throat and his arms.

"Serph!" Sera cried, and Ushas had to struggle to keep her from darting out past her barrier. Varuna fell to the floor, landing awkwardly on all fours. He quivered as he vomited up the lump of half-coagulated blood that had pooled in his throat; his Atma body, struggling to heal itself, expelled myriad of fragments of glass into a ring of blades all around him. A cold, stabbing pain marked where a large shard of glass had pierced him through the head. He struggled unsteadily to his feet, feeling the blood pour out of him. He could also feel a fearful presence drawing closer.

"I'm going to kill you, boy. You will *suffer*."

For a moment, the wavering shadow loomed before Varuna's eyes-- then his hands were wrenched upward, forced against the side of his head so hard that it felt like he might crush his own skull. His feet left the floor, legs lashing about but unable to find purchase. He felt the warm splatter of blood on his own arms and legs, the invisible enemy pressing his hands toward each other with unbelievable strength. His head wound from the glass shard blazed with pain, and a discomforting sound came from within his skull. Blood washed out his vision.

Then flaming claws raked at Varin's arms; Varuna was released from the terrible hold as the giant batted away an attack from his left. Serph's Atma dropped to one knee. He continued to bleed from many wounds, including several streams from his skull.

Agni stepped in to grapple with Varin, both arms spread wide, brandishing his claws as he struggled with all his might against an opponent that was barely visible.

"You're a nimble son of a bitch, aren't you?" muttered one of the crimson warrior's two heads. "Hold still already." Then his mouth opened wide and clamped down hard onto whatever he was straining against. Blood flew, briefly outlining his foe's upper body. A moment later, Agni took a heavy blow to the torso that knocked him back-- but not without a bloody mouthful of the

forearm that he had seized in his jaws. Even as he was hurled back against the wall, Agni flashed a broad grin, making a show of chewing and swallowing.

"You ate me! You *ate* me! Just like before-- curse you all!" wailed the giant. The bite wound in his arm stopped bleeding, but although his healing ability continued to function, he was no longer able to maintain full invisibility; now, they could see his outline clearly even without Sera's directions-- a towering, featureless figure that wobbled from side to side as it backed away. "Don't underestimate me. I am a colonel-- a colonel! I am Colonel Van Beck... and you *puppets*... will not--"

"We are not puppets!" bellowed Lupa, charging toward him with his flame-wreathed fangs bared. Varin brought up a hand, attempting to punch a hole through his chest as he had the last time they met; but with the bite taken out of his forearm, the limb was little more than a dangling bit of flesh. He struck the hound's side, but Cerberus' steely bristles resisted him and gouged his arm-wound even deeper. Then three mouths opened in concert with fiery roars, and Cerberus bit down onto his foe and dragged him to the floor.

Soon, the gunmetal beast stood astride the giant. "Whatever you and the Church are plotting, it doesn't change the fact that *we're alive, here* and *now*." Fire dripped from his mouths as he spoke. "I am alive because too many friends have shed their blood and given their lives to ensure that I have kept mine-- and I will not let you mock that life. I will not dishonor all those who have given of themselves to support me, to make me who and what I am."

"Such nonsense." Varin lifted his uninjured arm and swung it at Cerberus like a cub.

The great hound was knocked aside, and he skittered across the floor, his sharp claws digging into the stonework as he stopped and righted himself. "Call it nonsense if you will, but we are not puppets."

Varin began to rise to his feet. "It *is* nonsense! None of you will ever be anything more than--"

His ranting ended in a gasp, and then one trembling arm reached down to grope at the gleaming spear point that now jutted from his chest. Before he could grab hold of it, however, it unraveled itself back into the form of Ushas' golden hair.

"You will know the pain all your victims have felt," Ushas said, her voice ice-cold. "My friends, the people you dare to call 'puppets,' were given incredible powers, along with the hunger that comes with it, by the same Church that controls you-- and they met with unspeakable deaths. And now *you* will know the anguish and suffering of those people--my people-- whom you called puppets and devoured."

"It is *you* who will know suffering! All of you!" Varin Omega screamed. His invisibility was fading, his material form growing more and more distinct. He was indeed a giant, covered in dull purple rubbery-looking skin. Without his cloaking power at work, he did not look particularly remarkable-- just one more strange, demonic Atma. He had six slender limbs and a flat tail that slapped bloodily against the floor. Set in his tiny head was a single diamond-shaped mouth, from which erupted both blackish spittle and hoarse cursing. "Puppets like you... cannot hope to defy me... to defy Colonel van Beck!"

Omega struggled to regain his feet, but he had lost the strength to do so, and he fell back to the floor under his own weight. Black blood drooled from his rent skin, thick and viscous as oil. It began to pool around him.

"Your name is Varin Omega," scoffed Agni from one of his mouths.

"You're the biggest fool of them all, Kaz Homura," responded Varin with a strained chuckle of his own. "Even your own death hasn't broken that demonic little bitch's hold on you. The girl's witchcraft has you under her spell, keeping you in the dark from the truth." He pointed a shaking finger at Heat. "And you, and you, and you..." he added, indicating first Argilla, then Jinana and Lupa. Then his body began to steadily turn back into human form, apparently too weak even to maintain his transformation.

"And *you*," he continued when he had become fully human, pointing his bloody digit at Serph. "You're the Devil, Shin Minase. You were her favorite, the Devil himself. This hell suits you just fine, and the girl, and everyone else who was on staff back there-- every last one. So why did you have to drag me down here along with you? All of this is *her* fault. The Technoshaman--the witch, the demon!"

"I'm not Shin Minase," Serph said, remaining wary as he cast off his own transformation. "My name is Serph." He kept his right arm in Atma form, blade extended and ready to strike if needed. Heat and Argilla followed their leader's example in returning to human form, and then Lupa and Jinana did as well, all of them still on guard.

"I'm... a demon?" Sera asked. Jinana had an arm around her shoulders, but she shrugged free and began to walk slowly closer to Varin, the blood draining from her face. "What do you mean by that? What was it that I did?"

"Don't listen to anything he has to say, Sera," Argilla said, taking hold of one of her hands and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "We know better than anyone that this is all just a bunch of hogwash."

"Ha!" Varin barked out a rough laugh and a spray of blood. "You wish that's all that was. That girl has you in her thrall, and you've played right into her hand without even knowing it. So you can all burn for all I care. Watch as your little world is destroyed, puppets. Puppets..."

Suddenly, Varin's upper body slumped downward. Sera took a step toward him, but Jinana was quick to hold her back. He had begun to devour himself; his Atma had expended its energy reserves, and it had only its host's own flesh left to consume.

"What is this? What's going on?" Varin cried out, holding up one arm as it turned a withered black and began to lose its shape. "This shouldn't be happening. I am a colonel. *I am Colonel van Beck*! This isn't supposed to happen to me! Angel promised me it wouldn't-- and so did the other one, the Avatar!"

"Ah, have we reached the end already?" said a new voice, coming from up near the ceiling. "This came about sooner than I expected."

Serph and his companions quickly adopted a defensive posture, forming a circle around Sera. Jinana held the girl in her arms. Sera squirmed and raised her head up, gazing up at the white silhouette that had appeared by the handrail at the base of the ceiling dome.

"Avatar!" Varin cried as his outstretched arm melted into a thick sludge. "What is the meaning of this? You told me that I had the power."

"Ah, yes. I suppose we did tell you that, didn't we?" The speaker was a slender young man. He wore a white suit reminiscent of those worn by the Church's warrior priests, but his helmet, rather than covering his entire head, left the lower half of his face exposed. His voice contained notes of kindness, pity, and mockery all intermingled. "Alas, what we should also have told you was that your Atma, Ravana, was never meant to utilize those stealth capabilities; that was something that we added, via the Church, after the fact. Making use of such a power that has been, shall we say, *shoehorned* in that way takes a tremendous amount of resources-- the very resources that allow you to exist in this world at all, in fact-- and uses them right up."

"Spare me the long-winded prattle!" Varin shouted. His withering hand, now little more than liquid fell off at the wrist and plopped to the floor beside him. With a wail of panic, he cradled the stump with the other arm, which was already beginning to blacken at a frightening rate. Serph and the others watched in silence as, before their very eyes, Varin Omega began to melt into a black, tarry puddle like the ones they'd seen at the Vanguards' headquarters.

"Please, do something! No, I *demand* you do something, Avatar! That's an order!" A hard edge of desperation crept into the pathetic figure's voice. "I am William van Beck, United States Army Special Intelligence, Section Seven. I am Colonel William van Beck, and you have a duty to obey my orders! So *obey*! Do something about my body, and then kill those puppets! Kill them all!"

"Ah, yes, Colonel van Beck," said the Avatar, shrugging mildly. "Really, what happened to him can only be called a tragedy. And you still believe you're the real van Beck? Mind, even supposing you were, I have neither the inclination nor the obligation to listen to you-- let alone obey."

Varin was left speechless.

Sera gave a meek exclamation, and tried to step forward again, but Serph pushed her back and stepped out in her place. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

The man in Church white peered down at him, a faint smile on his lips.

"Who is this van Beck person?" Serph continued. "Who is Angel? Who are you, for that matter? These names Varin mentioned-- Shin Minase, Homura, who are they?"

"Ah, yes, of course. You," the Avatar said, leaning over the railing to get a better look at Serph. "The other 'me' that Angel told me about." His lips twisted up, and there was a note of loathing in his voice now that hadn't been there before. "The resemblance is so uncanny it's sickening. But then, Angel mentioned that, as well. Your face, your voice, your mannerisms, your build-- even that brand on your cheek."

He spat the words with utter contempt. Despite the black goggles that covered the man's eyes, Serph could nevertheless feel the icy stare of hatred piercing him like daggers.

"You make my skin crawl. I'd heard about you, yes, but to see you with my own eyes makes me sick to my stomach. But I guess the goddess never did care about how her slaves felt; isn't that right, Seraphita?"

"Seraphita?" Sera managed to slip past Serph at last. "Is that my name? What did I do to everyone? Please, just explain to me what you're talking about!"

"Forget about all that," coughed Varin, mustering the last of his strength; by now, half of his body had been reduced to tarry sludge. He had melted from the chest down, and even now the blackness was visibly spreading over the rest of him, consuming him from the inside out. "What do you mean I'm not Colonel van Beck? I *am* him! This is my mansion, the one I used to live in, recreated from my own memories of it. I am Colonel van Beck, United States Army Special Intelligence, Section Seven."

"Yes, memories-- ones that we gave you," the Avatar said, unable to suppress a smile. He purred almost like a cat, and absently wiggled his white-gloved fingers as if to make sure they were working. On the back of his hand, the double thorned circle--emblem of the Church--glowed ominously. "You never stopped to think, did you, just what sort of life you were living here? Where are your servants? Where exactly did you live, where were you born, what was high school like for you? Can you remember your parents' faces? Or those of your friends, your colleagues? Do you have any memories from your childhood? By all means, speak up; I'm all ears."

"I... I'm...Th-This place, I..." Varin babbled desperately as he continued to dissolve. His eyes were awash with terror-- not the fear of his body dissolving as it was, but horror at seeing his very identity falling apart.

"I'm... Colonel van... Beck. I was... k-killed by... Shin Minase." His word were babbled and delirious now as he continued to sink into himself. "During the Technoshaman Incident, he turned into a... into a monster and he--yes, he ate me, killed me! I remember the pain-- the suffering, the f-fear of... b-being eaten alive--pain and fear..."

"Yes, I'm sure that you do. We went to great lengths to dramatize things for you," the Avatar said, his tone strikingly casual. "Oh, Colonel van Beck did die in the Technoshaman Incident; that much is true. The rest, however, was nothing but a great bit of fiction. The part where that other 'me' devoured you, the part about you being William van Beck-- none of it had any basis in reality, my dear puppet."

"P-Puppet?" Varin burbled, half of his face reduced to sludge now. "No! I... am... I... am... Colon...el...van...Beck..."

"You performed marvelously, my nameless little puppet." The Avatar was no longer even trying to hide the grin on his face. He turned away, his cheerful voice a macabre contrast to the grisly scene playing out before them. "I had hoped you might last a bit longer, but I guess you can't have everything. At any rate, you did at least bring the Technoshaman here. It would have been better had you been able to bring her directly to the Church of Karma itself, but this will have to do.

"You've been very entertaining, my dear puppet, but I'm afraid this is farewell. Sweet dreams--assuming you can even have them, after this."

"I... am..." And with that final utterance, Varin Omega--or Colonel van Beck, as he believed himself to be-- vanished with a burbling sound, reduced to a puddle of black ooze, and was no more.

Sera took a step toward the Avatar. "You're despicable."

Serph reached out to stop her, but his hand was yanked back by some unseen force. The girl's black eyes were now afire with an eerie glow that they'd never shown before. Her slender form stood stalwart and upright, showing no trace of fear. The very air itself rippled and pulsated around her like liquid.

"Sera, don't!" Argilla rasped, but her faint voice didn't seem to reach the girl. Sera stood in front of the others, head held high, interposing herself between her friends and the Avatar as if to protect them. She radiated an invisible but very real power, one that kept the others frozen where they stood.

"Why would you do something like this? You're the ones who bequeathed the Atma to everyone and forced them to devour each other, right? And what you did to this man, giving him false memories just so you could use him as a tool and then toss him away-- I've never seen anything so cruel."

"Really, now," the Avatar said, "as I've said, this is all because of you. Why can't you see that, Seraphita? You are the Technoshaman, the living goddess, the intermediary for the Word of God." He drew up closer to the railing and leaned over it. "If you'd simply gone quietly along with the plan, none of this would have been necessary. These 'friends' of yours would never have known the burden of their Atman, their true selves, and could have remained the simple puppets that they are. But because you decided to run and hide here, they have known a hunger that they never needed to feel, suffered pain that could have been avoided. Yes, we did imbue them with their Atma, but you need to realize that it's you who's been the root cause of all this."

"So you're the one who gave us these powers!" Lupa screamed in indignation. He transformed one arm into its gunmetal-furred form, and launched a streak of fire at the Avatar's head. The Avatar, however, didn't even bother to move out of the way; he simply waved one arm, and Cerberus' hellfire dispersed harmlessly around him. Both Lupa and Heat gasped.

"Don't waste the effort, puppets; none of you can even touch me. I exist on a level so much higher than yours that I may as well be a god. Do you think that the created have any hopes against their creator?"

"Change everyone back," Sera hissed. The entirety of her tiny body pulsed visibly with suppressed rage, the indignation of a soul that had burned away all its fear. "If you're the ones that brought Atma into this world, then turn the Junkyard back to the way it was! Bring back those who are dead and free these people of their suffering! If you don't... if you don't, I will make sure that you regret it."

"Unexpected words from you, goddess," the Avatar sneered, his tone unchanged. "After all, the old you never cared who suffered or died because of you. Weren't you the one who didn't so much as raise an eyebrow at the sight of your friend convulsing while he vomited up blood? And he got along with you better and care about you more than anyone."

He then turned to Heat, who scowled as the Avatar fixed his goggled gaze on him. "Ah, yes, and then there's you, Homura. I didn't expect that you would be here, too. You're quite well-made, really; you're his spitting image-- so much so that it's nauseating. But then, given your degree of fixation with the goddess, I shouldn't be surprised; really, it's that same fixation that led to the incident in the first place."

"My name is not Homura!" Heat snapped. His arm was already that of Agni, and he cocked it to hurl a fireball; but having seen how Lupa's earlier assault had mounted to nothing, even he thought better of attacking. The razor-sharp claws at the end of his crimson forearm wriggled about, as if seeking something to tear apart, bathed in flame that looked almost alive.

"I suppose not-- but then I suppose none of you are even human, anyway. You're just puppets: pretty little oh-so-helpful puppets, created by the goddess."

"That's not true!" Sera cried out, her voice echoing through the chamber.

At her words, the Avatar groaned and abruptly doubled over. At the same time, Serph felt a stabbing pain through his forehead that dropped him to one knee. It felt like a thick metallic needle was being forced through his eardrum, like some kind of high-frequency burst outside of his range of hearing. There was a massive rippling in the air. His companions, too, were affected, starting with Heat-- all of them either covering their ears or clutching at their chests.

"What is that sound?" Argilla shouted, hands pressed over her ears as she writhed in pain. "Sera is doing this? That's not possible!"

"Let these people go!" Sera demanded. Her eyes smoldered brighter than ever now, burning with a darkened flame. "These people are not puppets. They are dear friends who have protected me. I came here to protect them, and I will *not* let you hurt them."

"Ah, yes, now *there's* our Technoshaman. Such tremendous power," the Avatar said, wobbling as he staggered back to his feet. His fingers were pressed to his forehead, and he grimaced in pain. "You haven't even regained your memories and yet you can still control such phenomena. But then, if you couldn't, we wouldn't be going through so much trouble to recover you." Abruptly a web of cracks crisscrossed his black goggles. They split in half above his nose; first one half slipped free of his face, then the other. They clattered as they hit the floor.

Sera gasped sharply. For the first time since she'd stepped forward, she seemed unsteady on her feet.

"It can't be," Jinana murmured. Her hand groped about blindingly, until Argilla finally took hold of it, squeezing tightly. Neither spoke. They both turned to look sidelong at Serph.

"Oh, dear me," the Avatar said with a chuckle as he slowly lowered his hand from his forehead. "You've gotten a look at me. Well, no matter; I don't see that this changed anything."

Serph was frozen in place, unable to believe his own eyes. The smirking face looking back at him was that of a young man, with the same black hair and black eyes as Sera--

--but his face was Serph's own.

Were it not for the difference in hair and eye color, and the absence of the Atma brand on the Avatar's cheek, Serph might have been looking into a mirror.

"How?" Gone was Sera's earlier resolve; she had once again become her typical, timid self. She staggered backwards and wrapped herself in her arms. "How come you have Serph's face? What are you doing with the Church? Why are you doing this to everyone-- to us?"

"My dear goddess, you wound me," the Avatar said, his sarcasm dripping with malice. "To hear you say such things when you had always been so fond of me. How callous of you. Everything I've done has been for you-- no, has been *because* of you. You who kept me *trapped* so that I could have the 'honor' of looking after a selfish, ungrateful goddess like yourself."

"I--" Sera covered her mouth with both hands and wavered on her feet. All of the power that had suffused her being had vanished; now she was merely a small, scared little girl, her body quaking with fear.

The Avatar chuckled cruelly. Two faces--one with black hair, one with silver; one full of scorn and disgust, the other a mask of shock and alarm--held the fascination of all those assembled.

Suddenly the sound of glass shattering glass filled the room. The Avatar stumbled and caught himself against the handrail. Serph braced himself reflexively as shards of glass peppered the floor like hail. The window up by the high ceiling had been smashed in as a massive winged shadow swept down through the opening, snatching up the staggering form of Sera in one massive arm. She let out a quick shriek that quickly changed to an indistinct groan.

The room echoed with coarse laughter. "Ha! Try using your powers now, you little bitch."

"Bat!" Argilla shouted. "No-- you're Mick!"

Heat's eyes narrowed. "You've eaten," he spat.

The upper body of Rahu, somehow still alive after their last battle, hovered in the middle of the chamber, keeping a firm grip on Sera as the girl struggled for all she was worth. The Atma's lower body was missing, looking like it had been crudely ripped off, and he only had one arm left, but he now also sported a pair of black, membranous wings from his back-- Camazotz's wings. There could be no doubt what Mick had done, whom he'd devoured, whose power he'd made into his own.

"I took the liberty of listening in on your little conversation. Stuff about puppets and whatever. Doesn't matter. I just gotta be the first one to get this little girlie to the Church, and then that's that, yeah? Thank you *so* much, by the way, for getting rid of Varin for me."

"Let go of me! Let--"

"I thought I told you to *shut up*," Rahu said, his one massive arm clamping tightly over Sera's face. For a few moments she struggled and squirmed, but soon she went limp, dangling like a ragdoll in his grasp. "Girl's got some freaky powers; gobbling up Bat gave me some of his memories. And I'm not about to let go of the most valuable treasure there is."

"Hold it right there!" Argilla shifted into Prithvi and hurtled a gravitational distortion in an attempt to restrain her foe--but she was a split second too late. The cackling form of Rahu, imbued with Camazotz's power, sped upward with a startling speed and disappeared through the broken window, still clutching Sera.

"Stop!" Serph shouted, but his cry merely echoed through the dome in futility.

"Farewell, fools!" The words came as a triumphant laughter, already growing distant. "Have fun spending an eternity in this hell, cannibalizing one another! I'm getting out while I can!"

The Avatar shook his head with an exasperated sigh. "Oh, dear," he said. "That complicates things. Ah, well. Guess it's back to the Temple, then. Really, having to use this avatar form as a proxy to get anything done here is beyond vexing."

The next moment, he was simply gone. His voice echoed a moment longer through the dome, but his form had vanished without a trace.

Serph shared dumbstruck glances with his companions, then shook his head free of the fog that had crept over it. He needed to focus on what to do next. So much had happened in such a short span of time: the death of Varin, the appearance of this 'Avatar' who shared his face... so many strange words that came so close to meaning something... Sera's abduction--

"We have to go and save Sera," he said resolutely. He repeated the words inwardly, to ensure that he didn't lose sight of that one and only goal. "We can worry about the things that this 'Avatar' and Varin said to us later. We're going to follow Mick, make our way up through the Temple, and get Sera back. Isn't that right, everyone?"

"That's right," Argilla repeated, just as determined. "Sera is a dear friend, and a fellow member of the Embryon. I don't care what Varin might have said; she came here in order to save us, and now we need to save her."

"Agreed," Jinana said, her hands clenched tightly into fists. "If I had been more alert, Sera might not have been taken. Besides, with Varin dead, the war between the Junkyard tribes is over; all that's left now is the Church and Angel-- and this man who calls himself the Avatar."

Lupa set a hand on Serph's shoulder. "Don't get off your game, Serph. I can tell that you're upset, but while this Avatar might share your face, he's clearly not the same person you are. Forget all this nonsense about being a puppet. The reality is what you see before you; take it in, and act accordingly... leader."

Only then did Serph realize how tense he had become. He returned Lupa's smile, and willed himself to relax.

Heat was inspecting the black pool of Varin's remains. He drew himself back up, then walked over to Serph, gently bumping shoulder with him as he stepped on past him. "What are you waiting for, Serph?" he murmured. "You're the boss; nothing happens until you get us started."

Serph nodded, and turned to lead them from the building.

When they got outside, the companions were immediately struck by the feeling that something wasn't quite right. Serph couldn't quite put his finger on it, but it was as if there was something absent from the scenery, something tangible that was missing.

"The rain-- it's stopped," Argilla said after looking around for a few moments, her shock plain on her face. "What does this mean? The Rain of the Dead has never stopped before."

"Maybe they've changed things; or maybe we've reached some kind of milestone," Serph said, his gaze fixed on the gleaming white spire of the Temple far off in the distance. With the endless,

silvery mist-like rain no longer falling, the shining lotus that was the Temple glowed so brightly that it stung the eyes, its beauty a baleful omen.

"Argilla, you've got a comm link on you, right? I need to speak to Gale. Could you patch me through to him?"

"Of course, sir."

Having given up on urging his unorthodox leader to carry a comm link, Gale had instead given one to Argilla. She held the portable device transceiver to one ear and worked the controls, but after a moment, raised a curious eyebrow. "That's odd. I'm not getting through."

"Is there a bad connection? Are you being jammed?"

"No, it's not that. It's just not going through. I'm not hearing anything-- it's just silence, like there's nothing for the comm to connect to at all."

"Let me see it," Serph said, taking the transceiver from Argilla. He attempted the call. Again, the device was silent, dead as a stone, without so much as a hint of static crackling through the receiver.

Serph felt a new dread creeping inside him. "Well, there's nothing we can do about this right now. We're heading out," he said. "Gale is out there somewhere; he'll figure out some way to deal with this. Right now, the rest of us need to focus on rescuing Sera. Mick is probably heading for the top of the Temple spire as we speak. I don't know if Nirvana really exists or not, but if nothing else, we can't let him turn her over to the Church against her will."

He thought back to when Sera had first come to them, how she'd trembled when she'd told him, *"I don't want to go there. Not to that place. It scares me."* And Serph had to believe that the girl's apparently guileless words were still true. It was clear by this point that the Church-- that Angel and the Avatar-- had no intentions of treating Sera like she was a human being.

Like a human being. The word stuck in Serph's head. *Human*. The Avatar had called them all 'puppets'. Puppets created by a goddess. But it didn't matter who had created them, or if they were truly human-- they had already crossed that bridge when they'd had their Atma foisted upon them. Whatever their origin, they were a team-- they were *friends*-- and they couldn't stand idly by and let anyone treat a friend that way. Not even their creators.

He called himself a god. And now we're going to defy that god. Any Nirvana he *has to offer is nothing I want.*

We're going to get our friend back. That's all that matters.

"We're heading to Sahasrara," Serph told his friends. "To the headquarters of the Church of the Arbiters of Karma."

Chapter 8

Now see the sharp tailed beast that mounts the brink.
He passes mountains, breaks through walls and weapons.
Behold the beast that makes the whole world stink.
-Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno: Canto XVII:I

As the group got closer to Sahasrara, the companions were forced to confront a deep-seated taboo within themselves. Even knowing the Church's compound was no longer the inviolate holy ground they had always thought it to be, the idea of marching into it to countermand its leader brought with it a sense of awe and reluctance that was difficult to extinguish. Serph, leading the way, found his footsteps becoming more plodding and hesitant.

"What are you waiting for?" barked Heat, bringing up the rear. "The Brutes have been vanquished, and Varin Omega burned himself out like a candle. There's nobody left who could possibly get in our way, except for maybe that smart-mouthed weirdo."

"I know that."

"Then let's hurry it up! We don't need to be cautious. If we want to get the girl back from that fat freak, we need to act quickly, not waste time overthinking. Once he hands her over to the Church, this'll all have been for nothing."

"I said I know that."

"Just calm down, Heat," Argilla snapped. "The risk of being attacked by what's left of the other tribes may be low, but we can't afford to be off our guard. Once we cross over into Sahasrara, there's a chance we might encounter the Church's warrior priests, or--"

Her words trailed off as she turned a dubious eye toward her leader. Serph hesitating, biting his lips, feeling the weight of unease and confusion in her gaze. Once again he saw in his mind's eye the envoy from the Church, the black-haired man called the Avatar.

He had my face.

The enigmatic figure could have been cast from the same mold, with his fine-featured, almost feminine face and slender, compact frame. All that differed was the color of his hair and eyes, and the absence of Serph's own Atma brand-- a scant three things.

"Ah, yes, of course. You. The other 'me' that Angel told me about."

Serph felt a chill run down his spine as he recalled the utter contempt in those words.

"The resemblance is so uncanny it's sickening. But then, Angel mentioned that, as well. Your face, your voice, your mannerisms, your build-- even that brand on your cheek."

Serph had known hatred before. He had felt an intense, seething hostility from Bat the first time he made contact with the Maribel. But what he'd felt from the man who called himself the Avatar far surpassed even Bat's fierce enmity. It was as if his disgust had clung to him like a stench. Resentment that Serph looked like him couldn't explain the depth of his ire. That was part of it, to be sure, but his words had carried a deeper malice that had surely been festering for quite some time.

Serph mulled over the unfamiliar named Varin Omega had used. *"Homura." "Italian broad." "Shin Minase."* Why refer to him and his companions by such nonsensical names seemingly out of nowhere?

"The other /me/ that Angel told me about."

Shin Minase.

No. I am Serph-- Serph, the leader of the Embryon. That's who I've always been. Never anyone else.

He felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his head and had to shake it away.

A large hand clapped down on his shoulder. He looked up to see Lupa there, a reproving look on his face, "It's no surprise you're confused by everything we've been through. But you can't forget who you are right now. You're our leader. We're your troops, and you can count on us-- but there's no way we'll be able to aid you to our full potential if you forget your role during the heat of the battle."

His fingers squeezed Serph's shoulder and then slid briskly away. "For now, all we can do is press onward; we'll formulate a better plan once we see who and what we're dealing with-- isn't that right, Serph of the Embryon? Sir?"

"Yeah." Serph clapped Lupa on the back, and finally broke into a smile. "You're absolutely right, Lupa of the Wolves."

One of Lupa's cheeks dimpled with a faint grin. Then his determined expression returned as he turned to face the path ahead.

Jinana craned her neck, peering out beyond the ruins that lay before them. "This way," she said, her nose wrinkling up as if she'd caught scent of prey. "I can see the tower of Sahasrara. Right now there's no activity apparent. But be on your guard. I have a bad feeling about this-- Sera said it's called a 'premonition.' It's like someone or something is watching our every move."

The others nodded in agreement. Ever since leaving the Brutes' headquarters, the closer they got to Sahasrara, the thicker and more oppressive the air had seemed to grow. Now they felt as if they moved through a miasma that made skin crawl and hackles rise.

"Certainly they must have taken defensive measures," Lupa said. "The Church, that is-- seeing how Sahasrara isn't the inviolate territory it once was."

"No, I don't think so," Serph said. "This is conjecture on my part, but I don't think the Church realizes that the rules of the Junkyard have lost their effect on us. I think that the same perception filter, as Gale called it, that had been placed on us has now been placed on the Church, and the Dissemination system."

If Gale were here, he'd probably be able to provide a more detailed explanation of things, but for now, Serph would have to rely on his own guesses and intuitions. He chose his words carefully. "The Church would never have permitted the initial Atma outbreak or the intervention of Avatar before Angel hijacked the Dissemination Machine. They acknowledge the existence of Atma, sure, but they've never acknowledge that the old laws are no longer in effect, and I don't think they're going to. I suspect that for the system to do so would threaten the very existence of the Church itself.

"So I think that, because it can't reconcile what's happening with what it believes it *must* happen, the Church's system has shut itself down. That's why our attempts to access it return corrupted data and viruses that crash our terminals; the Church is treating any attempts at external access-- including from the tribes-- as a form of attack. It may look as though the Church still holds power, but in reality, they've been coopted-- they're being controlled by that man with the black hair, and whatever organization he's part of."

"So what you're saying is that the Church has already been overtaken at the highest level by Angel and the Avatar, or whatever tribe or group they belong to?" Jinana asked.

"That's my current theory." The companions had resumed their advance as they talked. Now they made their way up a small rise. Bits of rubble crumbled away underfoot. "I don't know what organization it could be, and I'm not sure how they're connected at all to Sera and Nirvana, or to the Junkyard, ourselves, and our Atma; still, I think that the odds are pretty good that the Church was never the absolute authority we thought it was, and that our whole world-- ourselves included-- is actually under the control of this group that Angel and the Avatar belong to."

Jinana and Argilla exchanged anxious glances, and Lupa raised a curious eyebrow. Only Heat remained impassive.

"So what?" the red-haired soldier said. He spat onto a bit of exposed steel framework nearby. His saliva ignited the metal where it struck, as if Agni was already roiling inside him. "Control? Let's see if they have the balls. Anyone who tried to control me is getting reduced to cinders." A column of flame sprung up from his outstretched hand, hot enough to make the surrounding air ripple.

Heat's words, blunt and brash though they were, gave Serph the shot in the arm he needed. "You're right!" he replied, returning Heat's burning, crimson-eyed stare with a broad grin before turning to face the path ahead. "We're going to go to Sahasrara, get Sera back, and figure out just what the Church, Angel, and the Avatar are plotting to do to our world. If anyone gets in our way, we eliminate them-- with the very powers they gave us."

The others nodded in unison.

The spire of Sahasrara loomed ever closer.

The great white tower was the heart of the Church of the Arbiters of Karma-- once the very apex of the Junkyard itself, now a seat of false power. Even now it sparkled brilliantly, rising so far into the lead-gray sky so high up that its distant top seemed to melt out of view. The companions had emerged from the Junkyard to stand before it. Serph cast aside the specter of dread that the sight stirred within him. Ahead was the abyss that kept the holy land sacrosanct and separate from the rest of the sinful world. Ahead, too, was the bridges that crossed that chasm, the Arya Marga, the Noble Eightfold Paths. At the foot of each bridge stood a gate, atop which were inscribed the sacred words.

Om Mani Padme Hum
Om, jewel in the lotus, hum

Serph looked up at those words, fixing his eyes on them, taking them in, their sound and structure sending pulses of excitement through his body. Deep within him he sensed someone else rear up, and felt silvery power coursing through his being; he knew that his form and perceptions alike were being replaced by something other than human.

Varuna, the lord of water and arbiter of *Rta*. Serph remembered the tales that Sera had told him, about how he was not a demon, but a very old and very powerful entity, one who looked after the people and the world; a god who maintained the natural order.

He opened his eyes-- rather, he unleashed his expanded perceptions in the form of what, if he were still human, would be called 'sight'. His companions had likewise called upon their own Atma. Together they stood around him-- Agni, Prithvi, Cerberus, and Ushas, each brimming with incredible power, each ready for battle.

"Move out," Serph declared, hearing his own voice coming from Varuna's mouth. "Our goals are to retrieve Sera, and to attempt discourse with the Church and whatever organization controls it; I don't expect they'll be willing to talk, but we'll deal with that when the time comes."

"When the time comes, we'll have a fight on our hands," muttered Agni with almost drunken glee, "and I'll torch them all to a crisp."

Spirals of flame wisped up into the air form in between his eagerly flexing claws.

The enemy met them before they'd finished crossing the bridge.

"Halt, Children of Purgatory."

A group of warrior priests had gathered at the far foot of the bridge. They were clad in white suits, face-obscuring helmets with black visors, and short capes attached at the shoulder to give

the illusion of wings. They bore the Church's emblem: intertwined, thorny circles-- a familiar sight that had now become an ominous portent. They also bore arms. In addition to the shock rods they routinely carried for subdual purposes, they were outfitted with the same sleek sniper rifles that denizens of the Junkyard typically wielded-- and they held them at the ready, their fingers on the triggers.

"Sahasrara is sacred ground; engaging in combat or activating Atma in proximity to the Church headquarters is strictly prohibited. Withdraw at once and revert to your natural forms."

Agni growled out a short, guttural laugh. He moved to leap into the fray, but Varuna held him back, stepping forward instead.

"A member of our tribe has been abducted by Mick the Slug. We believe that he has taken her here, and is currently heading to the top of the spire."

None of the white-clad priests so much as moved an inch.

"I request emergency authorization to enter the Temple and engage in combat in order to rescue our tribe member and eliminate Mick the Slug, who has himself already trespassed without permission into Sahasrara and onto Temple grounds."

"Sahasrara is sacred grounds," repeated the priest who has spoken before. "The incident of which you speak has not been reported; there have been no unauthorized entrants, excepting yourselves. I repeat: withdraw at once and return to normal form. Punitive measures will be discussed on an individual basis upon compliance."

Serph took a step back, then flashed a quick look at Heat. Agni, ready and waiting, dashed forward like a blazing whirlwind. Claws that had been clenching and unclenching restlessly during the conversation now had their chance to blast forth an enormous ball of flame, howling into the midst of the assembled entourage of warrior priests. There was a tremendous explosion as the gate at the foot of the bridge was blasted into pieces, taking several of the priests with it. The remaining priests scattered like flying rubble-- then turned as one and lifted up their firearms.

"Disobedience!"

"Disobedience!"

Their voices resounded in an emotionless chorus.

"Embryon unit E-0002, personal name Heat, has engaged in violent resistance in the form of Agni. He has violated the stricture against combat on sacred ground and has attacked warrior priests. Punishment will be carried out immediately."

The priests trained their guns en masse on Agni's haughty form.

"Heat!" It was Cerberus, roaring as he leapt into the air and crashed into the knot of priests before they had a chance to open fire. Each of his trio of pointed heads butted a different target; caped forms were trampled underfoot as the reports of gunfire split the air.

Cerberus bared his teeth with a growl. Ordinary firearms wouldn't have even cratched his iron-like pelt, but these left smoldering holes on his sides. He thrashed in momentary pain, then turned to his foes again, all three of his mouths opening wide. The gun-toting warrior priests

were engulfed in a torrent of hellfire. Through the haze of blistering heat, their human silhouettes melted away as they were swiftly vaporized.

Cerberus turned one of his heads back toward his companions. "Watch out!" he warned, even as the wounds he'd suffered began to close back up. "Their firearms pack a lot more punch than the ones they distribute to us."

"Guess they think they deserve special treatment," Prithvi said. "Fine by me." Several of the priests who remained intact tried to get back to their feet, only to get smashed flat as if by an invisible sledgehammer. Prithvi dropped to one knee, hands held in front of her chest in a combat-ready posture. "Still, they won't need to worry about us for much longer. We're going to get Sera back, and then the whole lot of us are getting out of this world for good."

More of the ground warped and folded as she wielded her gravitational powers. Some of the priests were engulfed; others were torn limb from limb, or simply imploded. Serph wove his way past their collapsing forms, striking down others who tried to oppose him. Enemies fell on all sides.

Yet even in the midst of the melee, the companions noticed something peculiar: regardless of whether the priests were crushed, sliced apart or run through, they never bled-- and their severed arms and legs continued to move about uselessly even after being separated from their owners, as if they were somehow alive in their own right, attempting to grab shock rods or pull triggers that were no longer there.

"There's a corridor leading to the Temple through the grand entrance," Serph called out. "The Dissemination Machine should be in there; we should make our way there and ask it where Sera is."

"... Violent resistance. Combat on sacred ground. Warrior priests attacked..."

One of the priests who could still move hobbled to his feet, his body emitted mechanical noises. His helmet had been split open and smashed in, and a flickering green light shone from beneath his visor, but he didn't appear to experience any pain. One of his arms had been torn off and one of his legs twisted at an impossible angle; yet he moved with remarkable fluidity, repeating his directive to attack with a static-filled voice.

"Warrior priests attacked. Unauthorized use of Atma."

"Punish."

"Punish. Punish. Punish."

More undamaged warrior priests came rushing from all sides, brandishing their shock rods.

On pure reflex, Serph swung his arm behind him, unfolding his blade as he did so; he felt the dull sensation of resistance as one of the priests' combat suits was rent asunder like thin plastic. Before he could shake the motionless assailant from his arm, however, the remnants of another came crawling up to his feet. Everything from its waist down had been torched away by either Agni or Cerberus, but the upper body was able to drag itself along with surprising speed. It attempted to wrap itself around Varuna's feet.

Serph sprang into the air to avoid it; almost simultaneously, the half-priest was inundated by a hail of glimmering, golden light. Gaping holes were rent in his head, shoulders, and chests, as if

it were being chewed by some massive beast. Even so, it continued to move for a few moments longer, only ceasing when it had been reduced to tiny fragments. Serph turned around to see Ushas, her lethal, golden hair fluttering in the air, and he gave her a nod of thanks.

Agni let out ferocious roar. He conjured up a series of particularly large fireballs, bellowing as he hurled them one of by one into a close-knit formation of the white-clad warriors. As the sizzling barrage struck home, broken rods and rifles overheated instantly, their energy sources creating secondary explosions. Soon the pristine white walls of the tower nearby were scorched black.

As the fiery onslaught grew yet more intense, the grand entrance beyond where the priests stood was blasted open. The massive doors collapsed, revealing the darkened entryway to a corridor leading further inside-- but only for an instant. Then a blast barrier slammed down with a heavy thud, blocking the way.

Serph was working his way toward the gateway, fighting through a wall of opponents. With a gust of icy breath he enmeshed several at once; they toppled and shattered into pieces, their fragments soon trampled underfoot as the other Atma rushed up the staircase to the base of the Temple.

"Let's go!" roared Cerberus from amidst a cloud of black smoke. "I'll melt through the barricade. Serph, Heat, cover me! Argilla and Jinana, get a barrier around me until I'm finished!" He lowered his three heads, focusing the fiery breath from each on a single spot.

From elsewhere in the Temple grounds a seemingly unending stream of more warrior priests rushed to attack them. A high-pitched alarm siren was sounding, accompanied by a repeating warning that together formed an awkward cacophony.

"Critical transgression. Transgression. Critical. Critical. Critical."

"Eliminate rampaging Atma. Eliminate. Eliminate."

Serph and Heat used their powers of ice and fire to fend off the horde of warrior priests that kept pressing the attack. They rained flaming projectiles and spears of ice upon the ones who attempted to fire on them from a distance. Those who made their way closer were swiftly cut down by Varuna and his razor-sharp blades. The few who managed to get past him were met by mighty Agni and his flame-wreathed claws. Still more were blasted into the distance by Prithvi's gravity orb.

One warrior priest tried to slip past the defenders, crawling stealthily toward Cerberus, only to be snatched up and lifted overhead by Agni's powerful crimson arms. Its shock rod was batted out of its hand, and it twisted about awkwardly as it dangled in midair.

"I wonder if you'd taste any good, puppet," Agni growled. Then both his mouths erupted into laughter. He gripped the thing's head with one powerful hand and rammed his other set of claws into its chest. There was a horrid sound as he wretched its head from its shoulders. A bundle of gray, sinewy cables that looked like nerve fibers spilled out from its neck. "Ugh, maybe not. Bet you'd cause quite the stomachache."

He hurled the priest's body to the ground and stamped down on it. There was a loud crack as its combat suit gave way, followed by a muffled explosion as its torso caved in. Its four limbs flailed about for a moment and then went still.

"The door's about to come down!" Cerberus growled, his voice distorted by a mouthful of flame. "When it does, there's going to be a powerful backdraft. Jinana, get everyone inside your defensive field. Argilla, use your gravity control to keep the warriors outside of it. Everyone else, form up on me!"

Serph snapped his blade back into his arms and bounded over to Cerberus' side in a single leap. A moment later, Agni thumped down alongside him, fierce heat radiating from his bright red skin.

He flashed a fang-filled double smile when Varuna stepped back. "Too hot for you? To be fair, being near you chills me to the bone, Serph."

With a start, Serph looked down. Varuna's arm, with its armored blue-black skin, steamed where it had come close to Agni.

Cerberus let out an echoing roar. The fiery beast's three mouths redoubled their blinding torrent of flame, the three streams were concentrated into a single searing assault on the Temple door. As the blast wall began to give way, a golden curtain descended from overhead-- Ushas' hair, cutting off the companions from further attack and protecting them from the intense heat and the shockwave of the ensuing explosion.

A massive jet of flame gushed around them as the thick barrier became a molten waterfall and collapsed in on itself, the backdraft so hot that it instantly reduced the nearby warrior priests to ash. Even within Ushas' barrier, the heat was blistering, and the impact from the blast was bone-rattling. Cerberus dug his claws deep into the stone floor to keep himself anchored in place. Through the heat distortion and the cascade of fire, Serph saw the door to the Temple yawn open, looking like a mouth frozen in the midst of a twisted laugh.

"We're through!" he called out. "Everyone, inside!"

A scant few priests who had managed to get clear of the flames now tried to drag themselves back to their feet, each of them dripping with melted remnants of missing arms or legs. Heedlessly they pressed their attack, shambling toward their quarry, and Varuna and Agni worked in concert to drive them off.

Ushas leaned out from the entryway and urged the others on with a wave of her hand. "It doesn't look like the priests can cross this threshold," she called out. "Serph, hurry!"

Serph cut down a lurching priest who tried to train a half-melted rifle on him, then leapt through the hole in the barrier, avoiding its molten-hot edges. The residual heat from Cerberus' hellfire made it painful to breathe in the corridor beyond. Prithvi covered her mouth with one hand, gagging on the searing air. "You need to do something about this! Heat and Lupa might be able to take it, but there's no way Jinana and I can get through here."

With a nod, Serph released a powerful exhalation, allowing the mantra that pulsed through his being to coalesce into frigid energy and expand rapidly outward. Immediately the temperature of the smoldering air plummeted, causing the still-dripping ceiling to solidify in its warped, melted

form. Cracks split the walls as they suddenly cooled, and stray bits of building material rattled to the floor.

"How much further to the inner Temple from here, Serph?" asked Lupa.

"In a transport lift it takes about two to three minutes-- that's maybe just a little faster than going on foot."

"So about four or five hundred meters, then-- this'll go quicker than I expected." Cerberus lifted his three heads and peered around intently. "The inner sanctum that houses the Dissemination Machine can't be more than another three hundred meters past that. But we don't know what might be in store for us, so everyone, be on your guard."

Serph felt a tingling sensation along his skin. Varuna could sense the battle that was yet to come, and the Atma awaited it with wild joy. The slaughter thus far was not enough, his demon cried-- he needed more, more! He exchanged a look with Agni, and the crimson god of fire flashed him a tooth-filled smile of silent understanding, then turned and marched onward with purposeful strides.

"Heat, look out!" Serph cried as a beam of brilliant green light streaked out from the darkness. Agni raised up one of his meaty hands in an attempt to deflect it, but the searing ray took off his two smallest fingers and then severed his forearm completely.

Agni threw his head back and howled. Then, gritting his teeth, he snatched up his arm with a muttered curse and scowled at it. It had been sliced cleanly, its cross-section just beginning to well up with blood. Quickly he pressed it up against the stump where it had been cut off. His regenerative powers were strong; the flesh on either side began to bubble as the wound sealed up before Serph's very eyes. The reattached hand stretched its claws as if in search of retribution.

"Intruder alert." This was a more mechanical voice than the warnings they'd heard in the gardens outside the tower, echoing through the corridor in a harsh monotone. *"Junkyard personnel other than tribe leaders are not permitted entry into the Temple. Armed entry is a violation of Church law. Exit the facility immediately, or face forcible removal."*

"Shut up," Agni snarled as he tested out his already recovered arm before stepping forward. "I'm sick and tired of listening to all of your nonsense. Come out and face me!"

But there was no reply-- only a point of green light hovering in the darkness ahead of them. There came a mechanical grating sound, and the sound of metallic footsteps stomping ever closer. Another green light blinked into view, followed by a third, and a moment later, they could all see the hallway packed full of combat mechs with whirring mechanical limbs, each sporting a blinking green light.

"Expelling intruders."

With that electronic command, the green lights flickered, and then a barrage of the same beams that had taken off Agni's forearm flashed before toward them.

Serph dove for cover, but one of the beams clipped his shoulder, taking off a section of the armor there, and he hissed in pain. Ushas spread her golden hair into a barrier, but the light refracted through it in complex patterns, causing the beams to stab out in different, unpredictable

directions. Agni reached out to grab Prithvi, dragging her to the floor and throwing himself atop her.

The much larger Cerberus, however, had no hope of dodging the barrage, and he took several direct hits to the body and legs.

"Lupa!"

"Don't worry about me; they didn't hit anything vital," Cerberus rumbled, though there was a growl in his throat that hinted at the pain he was resisting. "We better expect a few injuries on our way through here; these beams of light are more than normal firepower, some sort of energy they're using in place of bullets. It looks like not even Ushas' barrier can protect us from them."

Prithvi clambered out form underneath Agni. "Light, you say?" She drew in close to Serph.

"Do you have a plan, Argilla?"

Agni was doing his best to provoke the enemy, but they made no move to come any closer. They seemed content to stay back at the far end of the hallway, out of harm's way, and fire from a distance. Varuna did his best to gauge the range in his head. It looked as though his own ice-blasts, Prithvi's gravity control, the flames of Agni and Cerberus, and Ushas' hair all lacked the effective reach to effectively counter-attack. The Church did appear to have data on the basic capabilities of every Atma, after all, so it was probably simple for them to devise an attack strategy that put their forces at minimal risk.

The powerful onslaught had momentarily ceased; since the intruders had stopped, the combat mechs were probably taking stock of the situation. Argilla leaned in close to Varuna, whispering softly into his ear.

Serph was taken aback at what she had told him. He turned to look back at Prithvi, through the Atma's visage to Argilla's face beyond. "Is that even possible? I know Sera may have said--"

"We won't know unless we try, and I don't think anyone has any better ideas right now." Her tone was brusque. "As leader, you should know better than any of us that we can't simply let them whittle us down here."

With that, she started to make her way forward. "Lupa is the fastest among us, but he's too big. This needs to be you and me, sir. We need to get into a position where those things can't reach us, and we're the only two who can pull it off. --Everyone else, stay back and don't move."

"What are you planning to do, Argilla?" Ushas asked from behind. "I had no idea that my hair would cause the light to reflect the way it did; next time, I'll be able to block it properly. You can't go in there!"

"Don't worry, Jinana," Argilla replied with a reassuring wave of her hand. "I just want to try out something that Sera told me about a while back. Think of this as a field test."

"Do as Argilla says, everyone." Serph steeled himself. If Argilla's plan failed, then the two of them would almost certainly be cut to ribbons by the next volley-- but as she'd said, they couldn't afford to waste time here. They needed to make their way to the heart of the Church-- and rescue Sera-- as soon as possible, even if that meant trying some things that sounded borderline insane.

"I'm going to count down from three," he hissed. "I'll go on one, and Argilla, you go on zero. Put up a gravitational shield, and make sure you stay close enough behind me to keep me in your gravity control range."

"Roger that, sir."

"I'm all right now; my wounds have closed," Cerberus growled, his bulky form hunkered low. "I can use myself as a shield as we make our way forward bit by bit. You don't need to put yourselves at risk."

"Three... two..."

Varuna crouched down, preparing for a leap.

"...one!"

His blue-white form sprang forward with the energy of a coiled spring. A moment later, Prithvi took off after him, staying close behind, hands up in front of her chest as she readied her gravitational control.

There was a stirring in the darkness ahead. Serph saw the green lights flicker and knew that another massive volley was about to be unleashed. He felt a prickling pull at his skin.

On reflex, Serph brought Varuna's armored arms up in front of his face as a hail of green rays flashed toward him-- but they never arrived. Instead, they appeared to bend around some invisible curved surface right before his eyes, changing direction and angling right back where they'd come.

There was a series of explosions as several of the machines were struck by their own beams and slumped to the floor, their green eyes changing to blinking red. For a moment the corridor was plunged into darkness, only to be illuminated as flames rose from some of the fallen mechs. The horder of multi-jointed, six-legged mobile turrets that remained appeared to be at a loss about how to deal with the situation; they jostled together, bumping into each other in the narrow passageway.

Varuna jumped high, letting out a battle cry as he unfolded both of his arm blades. He landed in the turrets' midst, swinging those blades every which way the moment he touched down. The results were devastating. Parts flew. He bisected one of the machines vertically and cleaved the turret-head clean off of another. Units that had lost some of their limbs fired their beams while off-balance, hitting nothing but empty air. Still more tried to realign themselves for a head-on firing solution, succeeding only in destroying their own units.

As the remaining dozen or so mechs tried to catch him in a crossfire, Varuna sailed through the gaps in their defense with a dancer's grace. He kicked off of the floor, the wall, the ceiling, assailing his targets from directly above. His reaching blades cut through two of the machines at the same time, and he followed that strike by unleashing a burst of absolute zero chill at the rest. The glossy metal forms frosted over, and the units went still. One of them gave off a billow of white steam before collapsing to the floor, and the rest broke apart like brittle shells.

One final, broken turret attempted to fire off one last beam, only to vaporize itself in the attempt.

Varuna landed poised in the midst of the wreckage, able at last to pause and catch his breath. He rolled his shoulders and turned back around. Prithvi was there, panting with similar exertion.

Their companions, further back, appeared dumbstruck for a moment. Then they came rushing down the corridor.

"What in the world did you just do, Argilla?" asked Ushas, bounding up to Prithvi. "It was like Serph was covered by some invisible shroud. Was that your doing? Is your gravity control even capable of that?"

Prithvi's shoulders sagged with exhaustion. "I just remembered a little something that Sera had mentioned before, is all."

They had been talking about "stars," and it had come up that, since these "stars" were so very far away, the light that came from them was warped by gravitational forces along its path, causing it to bend and shift. If that was true, and if this enemy weapon did indeed use light as its mechanism, then going by what Sera had said, Argilla had figured that a small but powerful gravitational distortion ought to be able to change the path of the beams.

"I'll admit," she finished, "that I didn't think it would work nearly as well as it did."

"Well, whatever. We've found the door, at any rate. Right over there." Agni gestured.

There, about twenty meters ahead, was the door that Serph had been through once before-- the door to the Temple's inner sanctum.

"Doesn't look like they're just going to let us on in, though," he said.

All around the large double doors, a series of tiny shutters opened in the wall, and from each one emerged a gun barrel with a blinking green light like the ones on the mobile turrets. There were more than fifty of them.

"No problem-- at this range, I can get rid of all of them at once," growled Cerberus. "Everyone, grab onto my back. Jinana, just to be safe, throw up your barrier, and Argilla, if you could do that thing you just did for Serph--? Serph, maybe you can use your blades to cut your way through the door. Heat, help me concentrate our flames into one spot, all right?"

Agni snorted noncommittally; but he clambered up onto Cerberus' back and stretched out his arms, a fireball growing between his palms. Serph straddled Cerberus' shoulders, legs wrapping tight around his thick neck, both of his arm blades extended to their maximum reach.

"Just give the order, Serph-- you're the leader."

Serph nodded. He concentrated on the frigid power that coursed within him, willing it up into his ready blades, suffusing them to their tips with all the force he could muster.

"Now!" he called out. A whirlwind of fire erupted into the hallway.

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Gale lifted his head, certain that he had just heard something.

There was nothing there.

He quickly scanned his memory logs for the past half-minute, but found no evidence whatsoever that what he thought he'd sensed had actually occurred.

Letting out a soft sigh, he turned back to his desk. He was at the Solids' fortress-- now the Citadel-- the joint headquarters of the Embryon-Maribel-Wolves alliance. All of the leaders were currently out on the field, and that left Gale on his own in the newly refurbished central control room.

Aside from Gale himself, the only member of the Embryon senior staff still back at the base was Cielo, and he was still confined to quarters due to his injuries. He had recovered to the point where he could probably have resumed his usual duties, but it struck Gale as a good idea to keep him inside headquarters until the leaders returned from Sahasrara-- otherwise, the impetuous youngster might try to sneak out and follow Serph and the others, as he'd done earlier when they were transporting Sera.

If only he'd had permission, Gale thought to himself with a note of indignation that he could not quite rationalize, *he* would have been part of the current field team. The thought still distressed him.

When he had approached Serph and asked to be part of the mission, he'd been overwhelmed by a peculiar sensation he could not understand or explain-- a wavering in his consciousness that he hadn't experienced before. He had vacillated, when he should have been more insistent. It had led him to question much about himself. Gale was a rare and valuable bishop, it was true, but he had begun to doubt whether that meant as much as it had in the past.

He entered a series of commands into the tactical console, attempting to access the database linked to the Church's Dissemination Machine, but the connection failed. The screen filled with gibberish characters, overrun with white and gray static. Then a message that simply read 'ERROR' appeared for a scant few moments before the screen went dead.

There in the now-dark planning room, Gale rested his chin on his folded hands, and thought.

Bishops were greatly valued for their tactical thought indices and their ability to analyze information, but their most unique ability was the capability to interface with the Church network, takin in the information and materials distributed by the Church, along with data on other tribes' movements, and organizing it all on behalf of their tribes. Now that the link to the Church appeared to be cut-- and now that the Atma phenomenon had rendered older battlefield strategies utterly obsolete-- Gale could only conclude that his value as bishop had radically diminished.

Certainly, as a high-ranking lieutenant in possession of the High Atma Vayu, he could contribute significantly to any combat situation. On the battlefield, his ability to analyze changing situations and provide strategic assessments was also of great use. His martial prowess may have paled in comparison to that of someone like Agni-- but then, Heat had a tendency toward insubordination, a quirk that had frequently caused Gale great chagrin.

He is far too rebellious, Gale muttered to himself, biting his lip.

As the leader's aide-de-camp, the bishop had a solid grasp on the dispositions and behavior of the other tribe members. Among those, Heat stood out for having been disobedient-- if not

downright adversarial-- towards Serph more times than Gale could even enumerate. It was incomprehensible to him why Serph continued to allow such behavior.

Though the letter of the old laws had faded since the spread of the Atma, Gale was still of the mind that tribe members should be completely loyal to their leader. Allowing a dissident element within the team meant that a soldier with a critical task might not follow orders at a crucial juncture. It was no different than holding onto a bomb that might explode at any moment.

He thought back to the question he'd blurted out to Serph earlier: *what am I to you?* It was a pointless thing to ask; the answer was evident. He was a member of the Embryon-- the bishop, an adjutant tasked with regulating tribal affairs. Nothing about that had changed. There was no reason for him to be so irritated at Serph giving him a routine order.

Irritation.

An ambiguous term.

Gale furrowed his brow unconsciously. He had been unable to comprehend the personality quirks his fellow tribe members had exhibited since their Atma had awoken within them, and yet at some point, he had taken to using the same strange expression they'd begun to use.

Irritation. Anger. Joy. Crying. Laughter. There were all words that Gale didn't really understand; yet it seemed that he still ought to be able to sense-- to *feel*-- what they meant, and indeed, he now somehow *felt* like he could imagine how Cielo must be *feeling* about being stuck in bed.

-- And then there was the sensation, the *unease* that was now knotted up inside his chest. That curious sensation was only getting stronger. He had run numerous internal scans on himself and found no issue with his cognitive faculties, but this 'unease', this baseless sense that something was wrong, was a new concept to him, one he wasn't equipped to deal with.

Part of it was no doubt due to the fact that Serph's team still hadn't reported in. Yet Gale was well aware that the five team members possessed some of the most powerful High Atma in existence, and this should have eased his concern; rank-and-file combatants, even the Church's own warrior priests, would be hard pressed to harm or hinder them. Gale had even run simulations that demonstrated this before the team set out. Moreover, they had agreed to not make contact unless some exceptional circumstances arose.

Gale had made the decision to give the comm link to Argilla instead of to Serph. The fact that Serph had a tendency to up and destroy the devices had influenced his choice, but the main reason was that Gale wasn't confident in his own ability to have a level-headed conversation with the tribe leader at the moment.

Something strange had happened in the Junkyard-- something very, very strange. Something major had changed, and it went beyond the Atma phenomenon and the adjustments to the laws that had come with it. It was something that had happened inside everyone.

Even Gale-- human computer though he was-- had not been immune to this change; and as he considered this fact, he felt an unsettling chill run up his spine. This must be what Cielo often referred to as "having the creeps."

Words and actions that were previously foreign to all of them-- things unrelated to combat, things that could only make their lives needlessly complicated-- had become de rigueur for the other members of the tribe. Even Gale himself had grown used to such feelings. At this very moment, as he sat in the middle of the planning room, ceaselessly sifting through a sea of data, he could tell that his feelings were drifting off in a different direction.

Feelings.

That word again. Another concept he did not comprehend, he tried to tell himself; but he quickly banished the thought from his mind, because it wasn't entirely true. As a bishop, he had somehow partitioned off the part of him that felt emotions from his analytical mind in order to preserve his objectivity. His companions, by contrast, had accepted their new feelings right away, as a matter of course. They had gone from merely being parts that made up a large tribe to distinct, thinking and feeling individuals. Yet even he found that he had emotions simmering somewhere deep within.

At present, Gale was performing his bishop duties as always, continuing to handle data processing quickly and efficiently. But this was a semi-autonomous routine, a form conditioning instilled in him by the machines implanted in his brain when he had been created. His personal thoughts, decoupled from this process, continued to creep to the surface, making him aware, yet again, of a baseless sense of alarm that Serph and his team had not yet reported in.

Most bishops would not have worried like this. Beyond their exceptional abilities to manage the data that they received, most bishops had comparatively limited thought and perceptions, let alone emotions. But Gale could feel himself mulling over a distinct, unsettling feeling of bitterness.

"What am I to you? Am I nothing more than a convenient tool for drawing up tactical strategies? Would you prefer I simply be an obedient machine that analyzes information, provides status update, and follows orders?"

Yes, that was exactly right. That was what a bishop was-- the only thing a bishop *could* be.

At least until now.

And yet, every time he alone had been stricken from a mission team, he had sensed the disappointment increase inside of him, until finally it had come spilling out.

What am I?

The rules stated that a bishop was to treat his leader's orders as absolute, but Gale still rankled at being the only one left back at headquarters-- at being that convenient tool.

His hand moved, without conscious thought, to the intercom switch for the comm link he'd placed in Argilla's care. As he'd been half-expecting, the call failed to connect. It had already been five hours since they'd set out; assuming things were going according to plan, the team should have made it to Ajna by now, and would be confronting Varin Omega.

Gale had also considered the possibility that Varin Omega had already taken Sera to Sahasrara. He judged it unlikely; Omega seemed far less concerned with getting hold of Sera than he was with killing Serph, and if she really was nothing more than bait to that end, then it stood to reason that he could easily hand her over to the Church after he'd used her to draw Serph out.

However, if Varin Omega and the Brutes did have the backing of the Church-- or whoever was controlling them-- then it was also plausible that the Church would want Sera safely in their hands before any fighting broke out.

If that was the case, then Serph and his team would surely head to Sahasrara to go after Sera once Varin Omega had been defeated. Varin was nothing more than a pawn in the game the Church was playing, and with the Brutes defeated, the Embryon would stand supreme atop the Junkyard with their three-tribe alliance. At that point, the three allied tribes would have already fulfilled one of the requirements for ascending to Nirvana; Sera's capture aside, a full-on confrontation with the Church would be only a matter of time.

The tracking data on the Ajna team had been cut off as soon as they'd made their way into the Brutes' headquarters. Nonetheless, Gale was somehow certain, deep down, that Serph and the others had triumphed over Varin and were now en route to Sahasrara. In terms of the timing, as well as their disposition (Gale's brow furrowed again), it was the most likely probability.

And this was exactly why he'd given the comm link to Argilla, and why he'd been so emphatic in asking her to contact him once the initial phase of the mission was complete-- or if anything happened outside of the expected parameters.

Yet there had still been no such contact.

Until now, Sahasrara had been inviolate territory, where both combat and reconnaissance were strictly forbidden. The tribes had no clear idea of its layout or military strength, so not even Gale could predict what situations might arise in the event that the team had engaged the Church in battle on its home turf. Apparently the current communications blackout was one way the Church had reacted.

He massaged the space between his eyebrows, which had begun to hurt. If others were currently caught up in a fight on Sahasrara soil, then it made sense that they wouldn't put themselves at risk to make a call in the midst of combat. Perhaps they were engaged in battle with the warrior priests who guarded the tower, or one of the various mechanized systems designed to keep intruders out, and were in no position to respond to any attempts at contact. In fact this seemed quite likely.

Gale flicked off the switch and then bit his lip, hard. It was taking all of his willpower to suppress the irrational urge to jump out of his chair and head straight for the holy land of Sahasrara. He reprimanded himself inwardly. *What is the matter with me?*

His leader had undoubtedly been correct to order him to stay here. Given the tribes' current state of combat readiness and the high number of wounded, Gale knew full well that he was the only one capable of effectively commanding the base's defense should a crisis arise. Before the coming of the Atma, he himself would surely have been the one to suggest that he remained behind; Serph would never had needed to say so. And yet now he continued to bristle at the idea.

But even as he wracked his brain, trying in vain to bring his meandering thought process to some kind of conclusion, his cybernetically enhanced senses, linked up with the counter-intrusion systems set up throughout the base, registered a sudden alarm.

For a moment, his inner and outer awareness jostled with each other. He hit the intercom switch before the call chime had even sounded. "What is it? What happened?" he barked.

"Bishop Gale," came the panicked reply, the voice garbled by severe static, "it's that *thing*-- the black ooze that Lupa had told us about. It burst right through an old access door that we'd welded shut and started gushing in, and anyone nearby got sucked into--"

There was a sharp burst of static and the call went dead.

For the span of two breaths, Gale remained frozen, his finger still jammed on the intercom switch. Then he came to his senses and darted from the briefing room.

The old Solids fortress was massive, and yet sounds of pandemonium were clearly audible from outside its thick and sturdy walls-- and then from somewhere inside.

Gale called upon his Atma as he ran. His body was enveloped in a blue light, swiftly changing to that of the emerald-winged Vayu. Wind whipped around his frame, allowing him to float with just the tips of his pointed toes making contact with the floor. As he glided along, he tapped into his expanded consciousness, his perception tied to the very air of the fortress and its surroundings.

What he felt was a concentration of fear, panic, chaos and pain, so intense that it seemed his skull was splitting. With a snarl, he abruptly cut off his extended senses, avoiding the pull of that morass of emotion. He conjured up a whirlwind to propel himself more quickly toward the building's outer wall. Deciding that it would be quicker to avoid the narrow hallways and instead head outside and make his way directly to the underground sewer system, he leapt out a window, sailing up into air.

Once aloft, he immediately saw a sea of black surging around the fortress-- a vast wriggling mass of muck with a nauseating greasy sheen. Here and there he could see the struggling limbs of bodies still being absorbed into it; already, it appeared that quite a large number of people had been engulfed. The mass of goo rippled and blistered open, sending out writhing pseudopods that wormed about in search of more prey.

"Shit, shit, shit!"

There was a group of half a dozen or so tribe members gathered near the entrance to the sewers, laying down a steady stream of gunfire. They were all gravely injured, with bandages wrapped around heads or torsos; none were able to activate their Atma. One of them looked up and called out to the bishop.

Vayu fluttered down alongside them. "What is happening?"

"Just what it looks like," the soldier replied, his submachine barking. He appeared to be a former member of the Solids, judging by the yellow square painted on his forehead. "We welded the entrance shut and even piled some steel crates on top of it, but this thing tore through it all like it was tissue paper. What the hell *is* this thing? Is this what destroyed the Wolves?" The man's voice rose in pitch as he spoke, ending in a terrified shriek.

"It would appear so," Vayu replied. He quickly directed the group to cease firing and get behind him. "Your report can wait; I want anyone who can still move to help spread the word--

everyone needs to get out of the base. If what Lupa said is correct, conventional attacks will not harm this thing, only the power of Atma."

"You want us to run without putting up a fight?" The soldier hesitated; he was visibly trembling, but the thought of fleeing battle went against every instinct of the inhabitants of the Junkyard.

"Serph has placed me in command of defending our headquarters *and* protecting the remaining personnel. Consider any order from me an order from our leader himself. You and your fellow soldiers are to immediately begin evacuation procedures. Assist any wounded who cannot move under their own power, and inform any units currently out on patrol that we are evacuating headquarters. We have neither the firepower not the manpower at present to repel this attack."

The man opened his mouth as if to protest; then, thinking better of it, he discarded his empty submachine gun and made a break for one of the buildings the black ooze hadn't yet breached.

The shrill alarm klaxon that had been blaring since earlier cut out. It seemed that some part of the fortress's electrical system had been compromised.

Like some enormous amoeba, the amorphous black mass dragged itself along, squeezing easily through the narrowest gaps and openings. As if it could sense that Vayu had arrived to confront it, the substance came at him from every direction, like a tsunami of mud. He leapt up into the air, out of the pseudopods' reach, and manipulated wind currents around him to keep himself aloft.

The thing moved with a nimbleness he hadn't expected. It reared up high, several times coming within mere millimeters of snatching him by the feet or grasping one of his fluttering wings.

Vayu heard a bestial roar, realizing a moment later that it was his own. His body gave a shudder as he forced the pressure around him to sharply drop, conjuring up a deadly blade of air and using it to slice through a number of the pseudopods that were trying to pluck him from the sky. It was a futile effort. The severed tendrils simply fell back into the formless mass below, where they were reabsorbed before lashing out again, longer this time, and in greater number.

Fiercely he struggled to keep the black tentacles away with his sickle of wind, cutting his way free just before they could wrap around him. As he whirled higher into the air, he heard a blood-curdling scream.

Catching himself against the side of a building with one hand, he extended his perceptions in the direction of the noise. A moment later the mighty front wall of the former Solids fortress burst from within. A wave of black sludge poured out of the shattered structure, carrying with it scattered pieces of equipment, chunks of rubble, and tribe members who hadn't been able to get clear. It moved far more quickly than seemed possible for something so viscous, soon joining up with the rest of the tarry mass beneath Vayu's position.

Before Vayu's evacuation order was even delivered, the black ooze had suffused the entirety of the base. The bishop thought back to Lupa's account of the destruction of the Wolves. It had been all too accurate-- and now the remnants of the Embryon and their allies faced the same destroyer:

a black *thing* that acted on simple hunger and instinct, worming about haphazardly in search of prey and sucking up whatever it happened to touch.

-- And yet this foe was different. Whatever the thing that surged below him was, it did not seem mindless. Rather than simply strike at random, it clearly perceived its prey; it hunted Vayu and his soldiers deliberately, even making an effort to take them by surprise, fully encircling those on the ground before rushing to engulf them all at once. The unsettling sight of an enemy that looked like nothing more than a thick mass of mud but moved with shrewd malevolence made Vayu's skin crawl.

Several meters above him, the wall to which the Atma clung suddenly gave way, and a black shadow loomed overhead. He barely managed to spring away from the wall as a wave of ooze descended toward him; one feeding tendril lashed out, and he cut it away with the sharp claws on his feet.

The substance clung to his claw in sticky strands. It gave off a rank stench-- a combination of burnt flesh, stale blood, and the reek of stagnant, grimy water mingling in a dank miasma that made him rankle with disgust.

By now the ground before the base was almost completely covered by the dark ooze; it writhed and twisted, and from within its squelching bulk a thin, reedy voice cried out.

Gale was struck dumb. It was a voice he'd heard somewhere before.

Harley Q.

No. That was impossible. Certainly, this amorphous monstrosity resembled the form brought on by Harley Q's Atma, and it shared that same hunger, but the Church had confirmed Harley as a casualty of war, and Heat had admitted to having devoured the rival tribe leader's body himself before torching what little remained to cinders. It was absurd to think that anything that had once been human could become this abominable sea of black mire.

The entire black mass quivered audibly. From its surface emerged countless protuberances, like villi from some monstrous intestinal tract. The sight sent a shiver down Gale's spine. Then, from amidst that shifting, roiling surface slowly arose the shape of a face.

It looked like a crudely formed mold of a human visage imprinted in mud. It was completely expressionless, neither its slack mouth nor unsettling, pupilless eyes containing the slightest trace of humanity; yet the features were firmly etched into Gale's memory.

He recoiled, unable to suppress his shout. "Harley Q!" Again and again he whipped up the wind, beating away the tendrils that reached for him. "Are you Harley Q? The same Harley Q we battled in Svadhistana-- registered by the Church as deceased?"

The slack mouth opened, but emitted only a plaintive, wordless sound. Then Harley's likeness melted back into the muck-- and a moment later, the swirling mass formed a different face. This one was unfamiliar to Gale; it was hard to tell if it was male or female. It, too, opened and closed its jaws, letting out a wailing sound like the face of Harley Q had done; then it, too, vanished. As it did, yet another face appeared elsewhere-- and then another beside it, and then one more. Soon the glossy black surface held a host of shrieking, crying human faces.

A groan of pain.

A wail of lament.

A shriek of fear.

A prolonged, atonal cry.

The writhing, quivering sea of screaming faces made the black sea look as if it were bubbling and boiling. Vayu could feel an icy chill in the air; he tried to climb higher, only to feel something grab hard around his ankle.

Damn! This was his payback for getting distracted for a moment too long by the hideous spectacle below. Even as he tried to conjure an updraft with sufficient lift to pull him free, the sticky tendril coiled around his leg, all the way up to his thigh.

Using a blade of wind, he sliced the tendril away; but as it began to fall, strands extending from its two pieces fused it together again, and gripped him once more. He slashed at it again and again, but each time the result was the same. Again and again he began to rise, then fall back further, getting dragged nearer and nearer to the hungry mass below. Another cluster of tentacles made their way towards him, attempting to grasp their would-be prey. Gale snarled, his body twisting, tearing away whatever bits of ooze he could reach. Yet no matter how he fought, he found himself reeled ever closer to the expanse of black, muddy faces.

A flash of purple lightning split the sky.

A bolt of lightning flashed past him, burning away the mass of black tendrils that had bound Vayu's arms and legs.

He fell. There was no time for him to call up the wind. The ooze yawned below him. His body spun, fingers clawing at empty air.

And then his descent ceased abruptly with the shudder of a mild impact. He then began to rise again up a in a steep angle. Just as he was struck with the impossibility of what was happening, he saw a pair of brightly colored wings and then the blue form that bore them. *A flying Atma*. He too was flying, of course, lifted up by the newcomer. Far below, the faces continued their droning cries.

"Cielo?" Gale gasped at last. "Aren't you injured?-- You were able to activate your Atma, evidently."

"It was a real close call," Dyaus panted in reply. "The wall to my room suddenly came crashing down, and this weird black stuff came gushing through, and I thought hey, that can't be good, so I jumped out the window. I wasn't really sure I could transform, but I figured if I stayed where I was I was as good as dead."

He was likely correct, Gale thought. Most of the people inside the building had probably been engulfed by the black ooze without having the chance to activate their Atma-- before they even realized what had happened.

Vayu and Dyaus circled through the air about the base, safely out of reach of the tentacles. For a long moment the ever-talkative Cielo fell silent, at a loss for words to react to the horrific sight down below. "Is this the thing the boss and the others were talking about?" he asked at last. "The thing that took out the Wolves?"

"In all likelihood." Now Gale was aware of something else unexpected; the rain had stopped. The never-ending rain of the Junkyard-- the Rain of the Dead-- was no longer falling. Without the misty droplets in the air, visibility was exceptional, providing a too-distinct view of the undulating sea of oily blackness down below.

By now, even the structures of the fortress were sinking into that black much. The gushing, filthy mass continued to expand improbably. As it did so, countless wailing human faces continued to throng upon its surface, bubbling into existence and melting away again as the mass spread out along the ground.

"Why'd this have to happen with the boss and the others are away? Sera gets kidnapped, we have an invisible Atma on the loose, and now this!" Cielo's distress was clear; he sounded untethered, as if he were drifting in a dark space beyond anger and fear. His voice was hollow as he gazed down at the mayhem below. "I'm just watching as everyone's... everyone's sucked into that thing, screaming, and--"

"Enough; do not speak," Gale said quickly. He could feel Dyaus' body trembling. The situation was perilous. He guessed that if young Cielo had been in human form, he would probably have fallen into a panic fueled by fear and chaos. It was likely only Cielo's use of his Atma's powers in his escape and daring rescue that had kept his mental integrity intact so far.

Gale feared that the youngster was up against his breaking point. Between his lingering injuries and the intense trauma of the current situation, any further shock might strip away the mental safeguards that allowed Cielo to maintain his Atma form.

"For the time being, we have managed to avoid becoming engulfed by our attacker," Gale told him, choosing his words with utmost care. "Please take us to a higher altitude so that we may see if anyone else has managed to escape; other Atma capable of flight may be in the process of assisting our comrades."

"But Gale, I--"

"Cielo," Gale interrupted, speaking firmly, "our leader has tasked us with the defense of headquarters while he is away with his strike team. We must get a clearer sense of what has occurred, as well as ascertain whether or not there are any additional survivors, and then inform him of our current status. That is our responsibility as core members of the Embryon."

Dyaus nodded, and said nothing more. With Vayu dangling in his grasp, he rose higher, soaring in a wide arc above the ruined base. Several tentacles reached up toward them, but collapsed under their own weight back into the muck before they could reach the altitude at which Dyaus was flying.

The black sludge seemed to have grown more dense and sticky, and the faces emerged more quickly and in greater numbers than before. Gale had no doubt that these were the faces of those who had been absorbed by the ooze-- members of the Wolves, along with the Embryon, Maribel and Solids that had been alive mere moments ago.

"Gale, look!" Dyaus called out with sudden urgency. They had circled above one of the base's smaller buildings, now completely mired in a mountain of muck. The ground around it had been painted a uniform black aside from one tiny spot that was still clear; there, a group of seven or

eight tribe members, calling upon their Atma, were pressing their powers to their utmost in order to hold back the ever-encroaching sludge. It seemed unlikely that they could hold out for much longer. The soldiers were all Lesser Atma, and none of them appeared to be capable of flying.

"Bishop!" one of the combatants shouted, voice breaking as he looked up. "Forget about us! This thing, it's... it's a monster! It's not an Atma-- it's not even alive. It's like... It's like... It's hunger itself!"

"We're not forgetting about anyone!" Cielo called out, voice full of anger. "Here I come!"

Dyaus dived toward them; but a forest of tendrils shot up to meet him. He dodged them narrowly, but was forced to swoop higher to avoid their pursuit. Circling back around, he unleashed a burst of purple lightning, but given the sheer volume of heavy muck, he might as well have attacked the pool of tar with a toothpick. The substance scattered for just a moment as it was struck, wriggling out of the way, but it came rushing back a moment later with even greater force, making its way closer and closer to the surrounded troops.

Gale could hear Dyaus grind his teeth, then growl with futile rage. The bishop could sympathize; to make any attempt to save these people they would need to land on the ground right next to them, and that would be tantamount to hurling themselves into the tar. He could feel the wounded Cielo's endurance flagging, and he knew that if he was already struggling to carry Gale, it would be impossible for him to take on a heavier burden. If Dyaus exhausted his strength, his transformation would come undone, and then the two of them would plummet into the muck with the others, becoming just two more members of that gallery of faces.

"Semetea, Vashyt, get back!" cried the blue-skinned giant who fought in the midst of that group, flailing his six arms every which way. But despite his warning the two Atma who had been covering his flank were engulfed by a wave of muck, their panicked faces visible for barely a moment before they went under. Muscular arms and clawed legs thrashed desperately; screams of panic were garbled and then silenced, leaving nothing but wriggling sludge behind.

Another Atma, a carnivorous beast with a flowing golden mane and the face and bust of a woman, jumped over beside the giant. "Granato, it's no use!" she shouted. Gale knew these two: Granato and Zaphir, members of Maribel, Jinana's two personal aides. Under their leadership, the small group had evidently managed to survive thus far, but by now they could barely move, so exhausted that it was a miracle they were even maintaining their Atma forms.

As they watched, the three Atma on their other side were engulfed, disappearing in the blink of an eye. Zaphir's Sphinx and Granato's Atavaka could do nothing but stand back to back as the sludge encircling them crept closer.

The Sphinx let out a roar and a burst of light erupted from her glimmering body, halting the incoming tide just before it could reach them; but the muck soon began to crest over her barrier of light, which could not stop the encroaching tentacles.

"Dammit! *Dammit!*" Cielo was on the verge of tears as he watched the pair struggling to beat back the sludge that struck at them from above. "Granato! Zaphir! There's gotta be something you can do! Can you hear me? It's me, Cielo of the Embryon!"

The Sphinx snapped her head upward. "Cielo?" But just as her golden eyes found him, a mesh of sludge swept in and engulfed half of her bestial lower body in a single rush. A piercing shriek escaped Zaphir's fanged jaws.

"Zaphir!" The Atavaka, Granato, grabbed her with all six of his arms and struggled for all he was worth to pull her free.

Gale watched him in dismay. "Granato, stop! She is already--"

But he was too late. Zaphir's upper body came free of the ooze with a grotesque sound, and Granato's momentary cry of triumph soon turned into a scream of horror.

In the span of a few seconds, the Sphinx's quadrupedal lower body had been completely dissolved away; all that Granato had pulled free- no, had torn off-- was her feminine torso, which now drizzled blood from the waist. Strands of sticky tar whipped through the air, refusing to relinquish its prey.

"Zaphir!" The six-armed Atavaka huddled around what was left of his companion, nuzzling madly at her torso with her head. "Zaphir, hang in there! Zaphir, Zaphir..."

It was clear, though, that she was no longer alive. Her body, covered in its lush golden fur, hung limp, and her half-open eyes stared blankly. The light in them had gone out.

"Granato, over here!" Gale called out in desperation. Cielo wouldn't be able to stay in the air much longer, but it might be possible to at least pull Granato out of danger if he were in human form. "We're going to come as close to you as possible; jump as high as your Atma can, and then transform in midair. We can still save you."

But Granato didn't move; instead he gradually reverted to human form where he was, still cradling Zaphir's golden-furred upper body.

"Granato!" Cielo cried, despondent. "What are you doing? Didn't you hear what Gale said? Hurry! We can still get you out!"

The barrier of light that Zaphir had created before she died had already begun to fail. As the mass of muck crept closer, the now-human Granato knelt and cradled Zaphir in his lap, clumsily stroking her limp mane.

"Granato, up here! Granato!" But Gale's plaintive cries were for naught. Granato slowly lifted his head, but he was no longer looking at his surroundings, merely staring off into the distance. A faint smile crossed his face, and he shook his head. Then, gathering up Zaphir's corpse, he began to walk out past the fading barrier.

"Don't do it!" Cielo shrieked. "We're coming to get you! Granato, please! We'll be right there!" Sparks of blue-white electricity glinted like tears around Dyaus' body. "Please! I can't just watch you die!"

Granato turned his gaze upward just slightly, fixing it on the soaring form of Dyaus.

And then, saying nothing, with the ghost of a smile still on his face and Zaphir in his arms, he walked into that waiting sludge just as the golden light flickered out completely. The black ooze engulfed him, and moments later there was nothing but undulating blackness where he'd stood. Granato and Zaphir were gone. The chorus of faces seemed to sob in lamentation.

Gale and Cielo soared in silence, staring at the victorious monstrosity.

"Cielo," Gale said at last with quiet authority. "We have to go; there is no longer anything for us here. As survivors of the three-tribe alliance, it's our responsibility to inform the leaders of the situation. It is a duty that we must carry out... and we cannot accomplish it by remaining here to grieve over the dead. Do you understand?"

Gale was shocked, inwardly, at himself-- he realized with surprise that he had used the word 'grieve'. It was a word Sera had used on occasion; by her explanation, it referred to a wish that the departed should be at peaceful rest after death. Here in the Junkyard, the dead became rain, and were returned to the Temple to be reborn. This was common knowledge, something that Serph and the others had always known; thus the concept of 'after death' had been a puzzling one for them-- particularly for Gale, who was bewildered by the emotional displays and illogical actions of his comrades.

Yet now such an incomprehensible word had come from his own lips like it was second nature. *Grief*. Searching inside himself, he could find no better word to describe the feeling he-- and the silent Cielo-- were experiencing right now ather their companions-- their *friends*-- had perished before their eyes.

Dyaus said nothing. He swept in a wide arc once more above the spot where Zaphir and Granato had been; then he lifted his face resolutely and flapped his wings with hard, steady strokes, turning toward the center of the Junkyard. The air whipped past them so quickly that it made Vayu's emerald wings flutter behind him.

"I'm not letting anything like this ever happen again," Cielo muttered after a time, his voice distorted by the wind. "Someone is going to answer for this-- for why these people had to die like this. I don't care about the Church anymore, or about karma; I'm never letting anyone die in front of me ever again. Ever. Are you with me, Gale?"

"Yes," Gale replied. "Never again, Cielo. As you say."

Vayu held tight to Dyaus as the latter flew faster and faster, becoming a streak of brightness across the ash gray sky-- a blazing ray, cutting its way toward Sahasrara, the shining lotus, the holy light that shone at the heart of this hell.

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There was a crashing boom as the red-hot door exploded inward.

A raging inferno whirled through the chamber beyond. The fragments of the ruined door sailed through the air, melting before they hit the ground. The iron-black beast, body bathed in flames, leapt through the doorway, turning sideways as he skidded to a halt, sharp claws raking the floor with a shrill sound.

A final plume of flame went up in smoke. Then Cerberus's four companions, riding on his back, lowered the dual barriers of fire and luminous hair that had protected them. One after the other, Varuna, Agni, Prithvi and Ushas hopped down to the floor.

Cerberus, gazing upwards, lowered his heads and gave a low, intimidating growl. Sparks showered from between his fangs.

"What is your business here, Children of Purgatory?"

The chamber in which the companions now stood had six entrances, from which six terraces extended toward its center. In that center was a chasm, and from the ceiling above it hung a massive machine-- a fusion of technology and biology. Multiple set of arms moved about slowly, tracing patterns of light.

The Dissemination Machine, the central system of the Church, the grotesque contraption that had hitherto acted as controller of the Junkyard, called out in an unwavering, emotionless voice.

"Entry into this chamber is not permitted under law. Only tribe leaders may enter the inner sanctum. You are ordered to leave immediately."

"We have no intention of following your orders," Varuna snapped defiantly. "Now it's the Church's turn-- no, whoever is behind the Church-- your agent, the man who implanted those strange memories in Varin Omega and manipulated him-- it's your turn to listen to us. What do you want with Sera? And how is she connected to the Atma you have bestowed upon us?"

"Your query is not intelligible, personal name Serph, code EM-00001A." The Dissemination Machine's voice remained a cold monotone. *"There is no abnormality in the Junkyard. You do battle, die, and are returned to the sea of samsara to be reborn on the field of war; that is your destiny, Child of Purgatory. The wheel of samsara will continue to turn until your karma has been purged and the gates of Nirvana open. We repeat: there is no abnormality in the Junkyard. The Church has issued you no summons, Children of Purgatory. Withdraw from the holy land at once."*

"Talking is a waste of time, Serph," Cerberus snarled, heads still lowered. "The Church isn't in control anymore. It's Angel and that man in white, the Avatar, who we need to be talking to. Let's look for another way up into the tower. Mick's probably on his way up there as we speak."

"Has someone brought the black-haired girl here?" Serph demanded, stepping closer to the machine, refusing to give up just yet. "The leader of the Solids, Mick the Slug. He was headed to Sahasrara with the black-haired girl. Has he come here yet or not?"

"There is-- no abnor--mality--in the Junk--yard." Static muffled the response. The ever-moving arms jerked as they traced their glowing patterns, jagging the lines of light they made. *"There is no abnormality in the Junkyard. The Solids leader, personal name Mick the Slug, code SL-00312A, has not come. The Temple is inviolate. Entry into the holy land is not permitted. Such is the law. The 'black-haired girl' does not exist. Does exist. Does not, does, does not. No, there is no abnormality in the Junkyard. No abnormality. No abnormality."*

"Serph, get back!" Cerberus snarled. Serph looked down quickly as his feet begin to slip. Instinctively, he stabbed his arm blades into the floor to catch himself. The terrace on which they all stood had begun to tilt toward the abyss it overhung. Each of the other terraces were doing likewise, slowly but surely.

"There is no abnormality in the Junkyard. No abnormality. Abnormality. N-N-N-No abnormality."

The Dissemination Machine's speech was breaking down; it repeated itself over and over, its voice increasingly distorted, like the sound of a recording on a disc that was warped and scratched. Its six pairs of arms ceased making their patterns and simply flailed, creating a tangled display that was painful to look at. Meanwhile, some sort of device deep beneath the chamber had sprung into operation. Serph's companions staggered on their feet, holding on to one another in order to stay up as they began to slide. The six terraces were beginning to fold down and back in toward the walls from which they jutted.

"Everyone, get out of here!" Serph called out, clinging desperately to the tilting floor. "This thing is going to fall!"

By now, his four companions were also clutching at the floor which had gone almost completely vertical. Beneath them was a veritable abyss, dark and gaping, with no visible bottom. Agni and Cerberus growled as they struggled to clamber upward with their claws, but they could not outrace the tilt to reach the exit. The doorway they'd come smashing through might as well have been a world away. Prithvi raked at the platform with the claws on one hand, her other arm stretched out in order to keep hold of Ushas.

"Argilla, just let me fall," Jinana said. "Otherwise you'll fall with me."

"Don't even say that. I'm not abandoning you," Argilla replied, her voice creaking with strain.

"Looks like these guys want to get rid of us now that we're in the way," Agni spat. "Typical."

"Argilla, can your gravity control support all of us at once?" Serph managed to hiss out between his clenched teeth. He knew that if he lost just a fraction more of his hold, he'd tumble into the chasm below. "Maybe just enough to lift us upwards? Give it a try."

"I... All right. It'll take some real precision, but I can give it a--"

She was cut off mid-sentence as a white burst of electricity coursed through the wall to which they all clung. No one even had time to cry out before they found themselves pinwheeling through the air. A moment later, the five High Atma were engulfed in total darkness.

Someone's scream of anger echoed long and loud, but soon enough, even that grew distant, and the sanctum was quiet once more. Through the melted, shattered door filtered a dim light, and a drift of hot, stifling smoke.

"There is no abnormality in the Junkyard," the Dissemination Machine muttered through the dim haze. *"There is no abnormality in the Junkyard. No abnormality. No abnormality. No abnormality..."*

The murmuring voice grew more and more gurgled, eventually changing into a sort of bubbling sound. The six faces spasmed, and the arms became a tangled mess before finally falling limp.

The vocalizations were cut off entirely as the six mouths began to exude a black muck, its sticky surface reflecting the light from outside. Soon the foul ooze began to seep not only from the machine's mouths, but from the seams where the machinery met flesh, the fixture where the unit attached to the ceiling, and the joints between the metallic components. Wails of resentment and screams of fear and hunger took the place of the Dissemination Machine's bubbling utterances.

Drops of blackness ran down the limp arms, eventually covering them completely. All light in the inner sanctum went out. And then, through the open door, there swept a mighty black wave, surging across the holy land of Sahasrara.

"Ugh."

A gust of wind carried a foul stench to Rahu's misshapen nose. He had been taking a rest on a terrace that extended from the Church tower's exterior wall. He stirred and peered around him even as another breeze carried the odd smell away. The rain had stopped, and the Junkyard sky appeared a metallic gray.

Rahu growled and shrank away from the moving air. He was cold.

The black, membranous wings that had once belonged to Camazotz jutted awkwardly out from his body, now a pale shadow or what it had once been. He twisted his malformed limbs, his sole remaining hand holding the unconscious Sera close.

His biggest concern was that, if she managed to escape at this point-- or more likely, wound up falling to her death in a panic-- his entire struggle would have been for nothing. And he had done so much! He had even choked down the charred flesh of his still-struggling subordinate, Bat, in order to gain his Atma's powers of flight. Now he was so close-- *so close*-- to opening the gates to the paradise he'd been promised.

"Nir...vana..." Rahu muttered to himself, unaware of the strand of drool that hung down from his half-open mouth. His mental faculties had begun to slip. The group of High Atma who led the Embryon had done a real number on him, bringing him to the brink of death; only by devouring Camazotz had he regained enough strength to carry on.

He had a clear memory of breaking into the Brutes' hideout in Vishuddha and plucking Sera from the clutches of Serph and his companions, but everything after that-- his arrival at Sahasrara, and his conclusion that the front gate was too well-defended by the warrior priests to make going in that way a good idea-- had become a hazy blur in his mind.

Dazed and weakening, he'd decided to take the direct route: to carry Sera with him as he went up the outside of the tower, heading straight for the top. He still hadn't fulfilled the other requirement for admission into paradise-- victory over all the tribes of the Junkyard-- but in his eager desperation he had overlooked that point.

The Church wanted the black-haired girl; he would reach the top of the spire, hand her over, and be welcomed into Nirvana. This was the sole idea guiding him right now, his one and only clear thought. He hadn't stopped to consider what the paradise called Nirvana even was, or what it would mean to reach it, and he wasn't about to indulge in such speculation now.

On a fundamental level, Mick the Slug was a man with an over-inflated sense of self-importance and an instinct towards self-preservation, and little else; now, as his surface

thoughts and his ability to reason gradually faded beneath the fierce impulses of his Atma, his narrow-mindedness and obsessive urge to cling to life were only getting stronger and stronger.

He was ravenous. The energy he'd gotten from eating Camazotz was going to run out soon. The tower was tall, taller than anything, and Rahu didn't have the strength left to lift his heavy body all the way up to the top with Camazotz's wings. The higher he fluttered, the slower he got; here and there, he would spy a terrace extending from the walls where he could rest and recuperate as he was doing now, but the intervals between breaks were growing shorter, and the time spent resting growing longer.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sera twitch, and he lowered his face to gaze at her covetously. Maybe, if he ate the girl here and now, he'd gain the strength he needed to reach the paradise that waited at the top of the tower.

--*No! No, he couldn't do that.* He narrowly managed to resist the urge to stuff her into his drooling maw.

No, if he ate the girl, he'd lose everything. He had to remember that this scrawny waif was the one the Church was after. Without her, there would be no entry to paradise.

"Come on, Mick. You're better than this," he muttered to himself, struggling with his tangled tongue. Only then did he notice the strand of drool hanging from his mouth, and he impatiently wiped it away. "She's the key to Nirvana. Can't eat her here. Keep it together, Mick. Just a little further to the top."

Slurping up some more saliva, he lifted his head up and gazed at the heavens. The sky was so close. With no rain falling, things had never been so clear. He could see so far...

A faint cry of glee escaped Rahu's fat throat. Just above, not very far now-- maybe two or three more rest stops away-- was the top of the tower, the top if the Church's chalk-white spire that pierced the heavens themselves.

The gates to the paradise of Nirvana were so very close.

The wind was a roar in Serph's ears as he fell.

"Argilla, Argilla!" He shouted as loud as he could, but received no reply. It seemed that she'd been rendered unconscious by the same shock that had knocked them from their perch. Jinana too was insensible; the two women plummeted together, headfirst, wrapped tightly in one another's arms.

"Serph, it's no use!" came Cerberus' frantic reply. "Dammit, just how deep is this hole? Where are the walls? If we keep falling like this, I don't think even our Atma are going to keep us from being smashed to bits when we hit bottom."

Just like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole, Serph thought to himself, an improbable smile crossing his lips. This was yet another thing Sera had spoken of: a tale about a girl who'd chased some type of animal called a 'rabbit' and wound up falling down a seemingly endless bottomless

pit. If they didn't do something soon, though, they probably weren't going to land harmlessly like Alice did.

Agni snarled as he launched a frenzied barrage of fireballs downwards. The flames briefly illuminating a vast empty space before vanishing into the darkness below. There was no sign that the fireballs ever struck anything.

"Heat, try casting your fire in different directions," Serph called out. "I want to find out how wide this shaft is; if the walls are close enough, maybe we can stab into them with your claws or my blades and slow ourselves down."

Agni responded at once, spreading his arms wide. The claws on his hands fanned out, launching fist-sized fireballs every which way.

"I see it!" Cerberus shouted. Most of the flames that Agni hurled had been swallowed by the darkness, but the ones he'd fired to his right had caused a scattering of sparks to fly as they reflected off of something.

"Lupa, try giving me a boost with your fire breath," called out Serph. "I'll set my feet against your back and try to jump to the wall. Heat, you grab Argilla and Jinana and follow me."

Flames roared from Cerberus' three mouths, the force of their expulsion acting like a set of booster rockets; Varuna clutched to his massive form as it shifted about, planting his feet against the canine's bulk and kicking off with all his might. The combination of his leap and Cerberus' fire launched him quite a ways. Quickly he extended his arm blades, thrusting them forward. He felt a jolt as they struck a hard surface, followed by a rough scraping as they dragged against it and cut in. He continued to slide for another four or five meters, then came to a stop, hanging by his arms.

Both his breathing and his pulse were rushing at a mile a minute as he looked down. Agni had caught the wall some twenty meters further below, Prithvi and Ushas draped over his shoulders. Another thirty meters past that was Cerberus, who had managed to use his fire breath to propel himself to the wall as well. For now, at least, they had all managed to avoid slamming into the unseen bottom of the chasm.

"Can you hear me?" Serph shouted down to them, craning his neck as far as he dared. "Heat, has Argilla come to yet?"

"I'll wake her up now," Agni called back with a note of irritation. "Hey. Hey, come on, wake up. Don't forget, you came here for Sera."

There was a soft groan. "H-Heat? Wait, what's...?"

"Don't freak out, now," Heat warned as Argilla flailed in alarm. It took her several moments to realize that Agni was holding both her and Jinana suspended above the abyss.

Serph tried to look down without losing his balance. "Argilla, are you awake?" he asked. "If you think it's safe to try, I'd like you to use your gravity control. I know you probably can't lift us out of here, but maybe you can slow our descent. I think our best bet is to try to head down to the bottom form here. Once we can make our way beneath the tower proper, we can try to look for another way out."

"R-Roger that, sir." Her voice was shaky, at first, but her confidence returned as she shook off her sense of disorientation. "I'll give it a try. When I give the signal, you guys let go of the wall."

Serph felt the weight on his arms lessen, and at her mark he kicked off the wall, pulling his blades free. He felt an awkward sensation-- as if his innards were floating around inside of him-- as he drifted slowly down to where Agni and the others were holding on.

Agni's twin crimson heads flashed him a look, and then he tossed Prithvi to his leader. "Here, you hold her. I don't think she likes me very much," he snarled, still carrying Ushas over his other shoulder. "You're not supposed to have a freakout when you see someone, especially not when they might accidentally let you fall to your death." Prithvi's slender form shook in disapproval as Agni continued. "Just do as you've been told and focus on carrying us."

"I know my job," Prithvi snapped. "But Jinana is still unconscious." Clinging tightly to Varuna now, she peered at Ushas, radiating concern.

Agni shook Ushas, who was dangling over his shoulder; she groaned and began to stir. Her hair, which had been giving off only a dull glimmer, started to regain its normal glow. "Argilla? Serph? Where are we? What did we--"

"The Dissemination Machine knocked us down here," Serph said. "We're in some area beneath the inner sanctum-- a huge pit that appears to lead to the lower levels underneath the tower. We're in the process of heading further down; Argilla is helping us maintain the speed of our descent. Once we reach the bottom we'll look for another way out.

"Lupa," he called out as they approached Cerberus' position. "Are you all right? It looks like the five of us have managed to get through this without any major injuries."

"Yeah," Lupa replied with muted relief in his voice. "Thank you, Argilla. Glad I'm not going to wind up as a red smear at the bottom of the pit."

The others congregated against Cerberus' bulky, steel furred form, allowing themselves a moment to bask in a temporary sense of security. "Looks like the Dissemination Machine sees no evil and hears no evil, even to the end," Ushas said, shaking her head and gritting her sharp teeth. "At this point, the Church is nothing more than a hiding place for Angel and the Avatar. It hasn't even been taken over, just blinded by the-- what was it, the thing that kept us from seeing things before we were given our Atma?"

"The perception filter."

"Right; I'm not sure I understand it completely, but it seems like they have something like that in place themselves. their own system preventing them from even realizing the extreme state of the Junkyard. And when we tried to make them understand, it caused some sort of error that they needed to eliminate."

Argilla huffed. "You're saying that we're errors?"

"Aren't we. though?"

"Then they'll regret ever making *this* mistake." Flames coiled around Agni's thick tongue as one of his mouths opened.

Ushas recoiled. Seeing her reaction, Serph let go ot Prithvi's arm and gently nudged her toward her friend. Agni shoved Ushas away like so much needless baggage, and the two women clung to one another, their wary gazes taking in the surroundings.

Cerberus released his hold on the wall, and for a while the five companions drifted downward in silence. The change in air pressure caused an uncomfortable ringing in their ears, and the unsteady floating sensation began to border on nauseating.

"I see the bottom," Cerberus said at last. He turned his three heads and his three set of ears perked up to listen to any sounds coming from below. Far beneath them, a point of dim light came into view, growing bigger and brighter as the group continued toward it. The muffled whirring of some sort of pump, mingled with the sound of running water, echoed from below.

"Jinana, can you make your hair glow any brighter?" Serph asked. "I think the Dissemination Machine probably believes it's already successfully gotten rid of us, but we should still be careful." Ushas nodded and shook her head side to side, fanning her hair out wider. The golden brilliance illuminated the darkness of the shaft. "Argilla, lower us just a bit faster; it looks like we've reached the end of the line. I don't sense anything waiting to attack us, but still be on guard, everyone."

Argilla spread out her arms, and the five began to drop considerably faster.

"Be careful," Heat growled. "I don't want to get dashed to bits after managing to make it this far."

"Would you shut up?" Prithvi hissed back. It was clearly putting a lot of strain on her to keep hold of the entire group-- especially Cerberus' considerable mass.

"Heat, let Argilla concentrate; *you* should save your energy and be ready to react in case we get ambushed once we touch down," Serph said. He found a sudden grin trying to creep on to his face. "Oh, who am I kidding-- when *aren't* you ready for a fight?"

Knowing smiles appeared at the edges of both of Agni's oversized mouths.

The group was drawing near to the light below. They could see a flat surface that appeared to be the floor of a chamber beyond the end of the shaft.

"All right, Argilla, that's enough," Serph said, judging the distance. "Get ready to cut your gravity control; everyone get ready to roll with the impact. Jinana, you hold on to Argilla. She must be completely exhausted."

"Sir, I'm all right. I can still--"

"That was an order, Argilla," Ushas said calmly, wrapping her arms securely around Prithvi.

"Argilla...*now*," Serph said.

The invisible force keeping the group in the air vanished, and their weight suddenly kicked back in. The five fell through the bottom of the shaft into the chamber beneath, and were suddenly engulfed in light. They held on to one another as they plummeted the remaining twenty or so meters to the floor.

Just before they landed, a fan of golden hair unfurled before them, Ushas' protective barrier softening the impact of their arrival.

"Good job, Jinana. Thank you."

"Think nothing of it, Serph," Ushas replied. She affectionately patted her friend who now leaned against her, panting. "It's thanks to Argilla that we made it down here safely; I couldn't let her shoulder all of the burden."

Agni looked around in search of potential threats. "What is this place?" he asked, irritated. "I mean I get that we're underneath the tower, but what is this cistern here for?"

Serph and the others now stood in the middle of a vast, white, brightly lit dome. The shaft that they'd fallen through ended at the apex of the dome, looking like a black mouth above them now. The walls were pure white, and completely unadorned. The air was warm, close to the temperature of blood, yet also curiously musty, with an inorganic mineral scent. A waterway like a ring shaped cistern ran around the edge of the chamber, full and flowing, filling the dome with its burbling.

Tiny ripples lapped at the edge of the floor like wet, flicking tongues. The water itself was inordinately clean, and the companions could see numerous shapes moving near its bottom; their forms were indistinct, however, and they did not appear to move under their own power, but drifted with the current.

There did not appear to be any kind of defensive system active within the dome, though they could hear the soft drone of machinery in operation somewhere out of sight. Serph could hear Cerberus muttering anxiously behind him as he stepped at the waterway's edge, carefully leaning out to get a better look at just what was flowing through its depths.

A number of objects of varying sizes were caught up in the current. Varuna reached out with his sense, attempting to ascertain what lay within the water-- and then he let out a sharp gasp, jerking back as he realized what they were.

"What's wrong, sir?" Argilla asked.

"It's better if you don't look." The words caught in Varuna's throat. His Atma form receded like the tide. A moment later, in human shape, Serph brought his hand to his forehead, and he shook his head as he went on, wearily. "Or... no, maybe you should see this. It's nothing... nothing dangerous, probably."

Ushas and Prithvi exchanged dubious glances, and then resumed human form as well. Cerberus followed suit. Agni, apparently alone in being raring for a fight, gave a dissatisfied snort, but followed Serph's lead and changed back into his red-haired self.

With a doubtful scowl, Heat stalked silently toward the waterway. Lupa had already knelt by the edge, his lips pursed tightly shut. Heat clicked his tongue as he shouldered past Serph and crouched down alongside Lupa to peer into the water.

His eyes narrowed. "Those are..." He and Lupa both scrunched up their faces tightly at the same time.

Argilla and Jinana made their way up to the waterway a moment later, and gasped at what they saw. "Those... Those are people!" Argilla yelped.

"It looks that way," Lupa agreed with disgust. "It would seem that we've managed to infiltrate the very Newborn production system that created each of us at one point."

Unable to contain her shock, Jinana stood with her hand covering her mouth, staring deep into the water. There, floating in the cistern that circled the circumference of the dome, were countless human bodies, or else masses of flesh on the cusp of becoming human.

The bodies in the water came in a variety of forms, and appeared to be in various stages of development-- some nearly complete, with discernable facial features, and others that were little more than slabs of flesh with protuberances that had only just begun to take the shape of limbs and heads. They floated in the gray-tinged depths as though sleeping.

Heat was never one to be fazed by much outside of battle, but now his voice trembled slightly. "These are the things we were made from?"

"I guess on an intellectual level I knew this, but seeing it with my own eyes is just... it feels wrong," Argilla whispered, furrowing her brow. "Just knowing that we all started out as lifeless masses of flesh floating around in here. Do you think that this water is the collected rain that runs through the sewer system?"

"I'm guessing so, yes," Serph said. "I suppose we now know for sure that not only does the Church actually gather up the rain that the dead turn into, but that it really is remade into new people here underneath the Temple."

"Hey, I hear some sort of beeping," Lupa had been staring into the water as well, but now his head suddenly perked up, and his nose twitched as Cerberus' might have. "Is that a call chime? Have we reestablished communications with headquarters?"

Serph looked over to Argilla, who shook her head as she checked the comm link. "No," she said, "we're still not getting any signal."

But there was indeed a soft chiming, easy to miss beneath the sound of the running water. It didn't sound like a security alarm or any other sort of threat. Looking around, they saw a small control console, roughly waist-high, over at one side of the dome, blinking slowly and beeping for attention.

Serph carefully made his way over to the station and brought his hands to the console.

The chime stopped. "Welcome to the ASURA Production System, Samsara," announced a female voice. "The current time is 00:32.012 LT. The system is operating normally. Please enter the output command for the mechanism or production report you would like to check."

"What the hell is this thing?" Heat scoffed as he looked down at the talking machine.

"Looks like it manages the Newborn production facility," Serph replied, inspecting the icons and the text on the various panels in which the screen was divided. "Either it's independent from the Dissemination Machine, or else the Dissemination Machine's inability to acknowledge abnormalities is making it think that we're warrior priests or something."

He picked out one of the icons and touched it, then tapped a few more panels. The area in front of him grew brighter, and a holographic display about two meters square flickered into being. Data about the colossal number of Newborns produced in this facility and subsequently sent out into the world scrolled across the monitor. Deceased, Alive, Alive, Deceased, Alive. Many of the names that scrolled by were ones he recognized.

If he looked closely enough, Serph thought, he might be able to find his own name, along with those of his companions. A sense of unease crept over him, and he tapped the panel to switch off the display.

"My name's probably in there-- twice, even," murmured Lupa, who had stepped up alongside him. He frowned with distaste. "This just feels wrong, being shown exactly what kind of product you are."

Yes, Serph agreed inwardly. *We are products.*

Here in this place, they had been created by an autonomous process, like weapons or artillery, and then sent up to the surface to do battle with one another-- and all for what? To find out who was strongest? To claim a place in Nirvana-- if it even existed? In all likelihood, the Church's songs and tales of paradise and salvation were nothing but veil of lies. If it hadn't been for the appearance of Sera and the Atma-- which had utterly changed the Junkyard and its denizens, seemingly without the Church's full understanding-- this cycle would have probably gone and on, unbroken.

But who had created this cold, cruel system in the first place, and why?

No. Trying to conjure up an answer for that question would be a waste of time. The quickest way to find the truth was surely to ask the highest echelon of the Church directly-- to demand an explanation from the ones so desperate to get their hands on Sera: Angel and Avatar. Serph snarled, and felt his teeth elongate into fangs, prickling the inside of his mouth. Varuna was reawakening in response to his bearer's rage. The blood tasted sweet.

"There it is. That's the look I like to see." Heat grinned with satisfaction. "Anyone who tried to use us-- who tries to control us-- is our enemy, and our enemies will be crushed underfoot and reduced to ash. They will regret creating us to be part of their little playground."

"*If* we can find a way to get up to where they are," Jinana said, studying their surroundings. "Mick may have already brought Sera to the top of the tower. Serph, if there's a control console down here, then that implies people come down here to use it; can you check to see if there's some type of elevator or other means they might use to get here?"

"Give me a moment." Serph had begun to decipher the control panel. He tapped a series of icons, making his way through the directory system, and eventually managed to call up a floor map, which highlighted access points to the upper levels in red.

"All right, here we go. I just need to input the end command, and the gate will lift up automatically and allow us to access the elevator."

Argilla wrapped her arms around herself and shuddered. "Well, hurry up and do it. I want to get out of here now. This place gives me the creeps."

Jinana put an arm around her friend's shoulders. "Yes, let's do it, then, Serph. We have no time to waste."

Serph completed the protocols and gave the icon for the end command a firm push.

"End command accepted. Opening bridge to upper level gate," the soothing female voice stated. The floor trembled faintly. Then the shaft overhead closed, and another section of the ceiling closer to the wall opened up instead. There was a mechanical whirring as a transparent,

cylindrical tube began to descend through it-- the elevator shaft, evidently. At the same time, the floor beneath it extended, breaking the perfect circle formed by the waterway in order to connect to the wall. The shaft silently touched down on the extended floor, and stopped.

A section of the cylinder opened without a sound, allowing entry into the vertical tube. There was a console like the one Serph had just been using visible atop the round platform inside the translucent cabin.

"All right, then. Guess the only way for us to go now is up." Serph led the other toward the walkway that spanned the cistern, relieved to see a way forward.

The relief was short-lived.

Suddenly, Lupa stopped short. "Serph, wait!" He looked around warily, curling his lips back to expose his teeth. "The enemy; I can sense it-- *smell* it."

His words changed to a growl as the light of his transformation enveloped him. The steel-furred form of Cerberus gave a quick shake before darting forward with a snarl. "The smell-- it's that *thing*, the black ooze!" With a mighty roar, he belched out a blast of flame.

A sound like that of sizzling oil filled the air. The heat of the backdraft forced Serph to cover his face and back away. Water from the cistern rose up and grew cloudy, becoming first a muddy gray and then a glistening black, wriggling and reaching toward them.

"The system is operating normally," the console-voice stated incongruously. "End command has been entered."

More water roiled from the waterway, and a cloud of heated steam began to permeate the surrounding area with the stench of burned flesh as the computer system's voice placidly continued.

"End command has been entered. Opening bridge. Bbbridge. Opening bbbridge bridge bridge bridge bridge."

"Dammit!" Heat snarled. "It's just like what happened with the Dissemination Machine!" He too was swallowed by blue light as he changed into the red form of Agni.

Serph shifted into Varuna. "We don't have time to fight this thing!" The amorphous black sludge was surrounding them, creeping along the floor. He froze it into solid clumps as it tried to get near him, shattering the ends of its tentacles. A swing of his blade pulverized one of the larger fragments into smaller bits, but they soon thawed and were reabsorbed by the larger mass.

"Heat and I will buy us some time," he shouted. "You three hurry and try to get the elevator ready to go. There's too much of this stuff for us to fend off."

"Serph, no!" Cerberus snapped. "Freezing this stuff doesn't have any effect; we already know that!" He nudged Varuna out of the way as they strode toward the encroaching ooze. "I'll burn this stuff away-- maybe I can't get all of it, but my flames can still hold it back for a while."

"Come on, now, Lupa; don't try to hog all the fun for yourself."

"I guess I've always been a little selfish that way," Cerberus said with a fang-filled smile form one mouth, and then added, with a sharper voice, "Go! If we keep dawdling, that thing's going to swallow up the bridge."

Serph and Heat exchanged quick glances. Lupa was right, Serph realized. The waterway that ran around the circumference of the circular dome was now completely filled with the black muck, and still more of it bubbled forth from the cistern, hungrily extending its shapeless feelers.

Argilla and Jinana had already reactivated their Atma. The two stayed close as they squared off against the incoming wave of tentacles. Ushas' hair shone brightly as it slashed, and Prithvi let out a battle cry as she hurled orbs of pure gravitational force. Tendrils were sliced off and crushed, but the amorphous substance reacted much the same as when Varuna had cut it apart; it didn't seem that the pair were doing much real damage. The surface of the dark mass was riddled with holes, like a ratty sponge, but those holes soon filled themselves back up.

Before long the sludge started to slither its way around the edge of the gravity field that was holding it back. The two women looked on, aghast, as it came at them from all sides.

A swirl of fire swept the area. Intense heat and an awful stench filled the air as the black wave withdrew, screeching and reeking, exuding an aura of pure hunger. Cerberus interposed himself between it and Ushas and Prithvi. "I told you to hurry!" He spat fire as he spoke; then his right head turned to look back at Serph and the others. "I'll cover our rear. Heat, you clear a path forward. Serph, try to freeze the surface of the water as best you can, maybe you can slow it down."

Agni leapt forward with a roar, both of his fists encased with flame as he began to pound on the tidal wave of blackness in his way. Black smoke billowed, reeking of overcooked meat, and an ear-splitting screech echoed through the dome. The mass shifted back slightly, just enough to expose a path to the bridge that it had been covering up.

"Argilla, Jinana, come on!" Serph shouted. Chilling air swept outward from Varuna's silvery form. A worming wave tried to rise up against him, only to freeze solidly in place. "Remember, our priority is to get to the top of the tower! Think about Sera. Hurry!"

Prithvi and Ushas hesitated for only an instant before sprinting through the space Agni had cleared with his flames. Cerberus continued to hold the rear guard, using his breath to sear away the tsunami of blackness that continued to pursue them.

The muck that Varuna had frozen did not stay that way for very long; soon enough, its frosty surface began to melt, the black substance dripping down to be sucked back into the central mass and extend anew as rippling arms. Each time the tendrils came for them, Agni's flaming claws would flash, and then Varuna would call for his ice. But each time the enemy recovered from their attacks more quickly.

The elevator's open door was in reach, now-- but there was no way everyone would fit in their Atma forms. Agni hurtled on final volley of massive fireballs to clear the path, driving back the flood of black tentacles; Varuna likewise called up a final surge of power, unleashing frigid energy to freeze as much of the sludge around him as he possibly could.

"Get in, now!" Serph changed back into human form and leapt into the elevator. Heat and Argilla followed suit, Jinana right behind them. Cerberus was still some distance away, torching the mass of tendrils that were still stubbornly trying to claim him.

"Is this thing still operational?" Argilla asked.

"Doesn't look like it's been corrupted yet," Heat said. "Hit the switch."

The production system may have been overwhelmed by the devouring ooze, but the elevator control system indeed appeared unaffected. Serph touched the panel, and the dim display brightened.

"Please touch the button for your desired destination," announced a voice not unlike that of the production system interface. The elevator appeared capable of moving not only up and down, but to any location in the Temple; the display panel showed a complex map of the tower complex. Without hesitation, Serph pressed the button for the top floor of the topmost section of the tower.

An alert sounded. "A password is required for access to any Temple chamber above the seventh floor," the artificial female voice stated coolly. "Please input the corresponding password for the displayed term, then press 'Enter'."

The display then went dark as the interface disappeared, replaced by a singled word.

[SERAPHITA]

"Sera...phita?" Heat's brow furrowed as he stared at the screen.

Argilla let out a muted gasp. "Seraphita-- isn't what Varin Omega called Sera?"

"We don't have the time to dwell on that," Jinana cut in. "Lupa can't hold out much longer. If we don't get out of here right now, we're all dead."

The fire-breathing canine beast was gradually backing his way toward the elevator, spouting flames nearly non-stop to create a wall of fire around him. Yet even that tightly woven barrier of hellfire was unable to completely stop the ever increasing mass of black ooze that crept onward, relentless and determined. "What's the holdup?" Cerberus' left head barked. "The more I burn this stuff away the less it's working-- like it's building up some kind of resistance."

"Sorry! We're getting it going now. Just give us a second," Serph said through gritted teeth, staring at the display as it flashed the word SERAPHITA over and over. He felt for sure that he knew the answer, but it simply wouldn't come. The frustration twisted like a knife in his gut.

It was the same as when he'd first laid eyes on Sera, he realized. He hadn't been able to shake the feeling, deep down, that he somehow knew this girl from somewhere. And here he was, certain that he knew the word he needed now, but just couldn't think of it.

"Well don't just stand there," Heat said. "Just try typing in whatever comes to mind." He reached out and tried to push Serph's hand out of the way.

Serph held his own arm out to ward him off. "Hold on." There might be a limited number of failed attempts before the elevator went into lockdown, and if that happened, they were all done for. All of them would be swallowed up, here and now, by the looming wave of black sludge.

A tiny mewling rang in his ears.

Unthinkingly, Serph gazed upward. There, up near the ceiling, sitting in empty space, was a small black creature, waving its long tail slowly back and forth.

A black cat, with big ears, a long tail, and silver eyes.

The cat gazed wisely back at Serph, then showed its red mouth with a wide yawn. Hopping to its feet, it began walking in midair. After two or three steps, its form dissolved into nothingness, and disappeared.

"Hey, Serph!" Heat shook him by the shoulder. "Are you listening? We need to hurry! If you think you know what the password is then type it in. If not, then let me or someone else try. We're running out of time."

Without a word, Serph shoved Heat out of the way and brought his hands back up to the panel. Using the touchscreen keyboard, he smoothly input a string of letters.

[SERAPHITUS]

A clear chime sounded. "Password accepted. Selected destination approved. Please close the door and refrain from making any sudden or exaggerated movements. When you are ready to depart, please press the 'Close' key."

Serph didn't waste any time. "Lupa, get in!" he shouted. "The elevator's good to go, and we're not leaving you behind!"

Cerberus gave one last sweep of his head, spewing a raging inferno at the surrounding sludge, then turned and sprang for the doorway as Serph hit the key. Tentacles shrieked and burned to ash as they tried to worm their way into the elevator. Lupa returned to human form in midair, slipping through the door just before it slammed shut; then the elevator began to lift silently upwards.

The tips of a few black tendrils had been cut off by the closing door; now they wriggled as they fell to the floor. With a growl of disgust Heat turned his fist into that of Agni, slamming it down onto the squirming remnants. There was a whoosh as the tendrils went up in flames, and he stomped on their shriveled husks with his boot.

Serph looked down at the sight below. The entire floor of the dome had been overrun by the black sludge, and here and there, he could see things bubbling and seething: human faces, appearing one after another-- faces now made of muck, each contorted in a rictus of pain, trapped in a state of eternal hunger and suffering.

"Whew. Right in the nick of time," Lupa sighed, sinking to the floor with his back against the door. He rubbed his face. "To be honest, for a minute there, I didn't think we were gonna make it. Thank you, Serph. You saved us. But how did you know the right password?"

"I don't know. It's like someone told me." Serph fixed his silver eyes on Lupa for a moment, and then shook his head. "No, it's more like... someone made me remember. I can't really explain it myself. I just... knew, somehow."

He considered telling them about the cat, but decided against it. *It would only confuse everyone much more.* No one seemed inclined to press the issue; Heat flared his nostrils, snorted, and looked away, and the others just sat on the floor, leaning against the wall, relieved to have escaped danger for the time being.

"Is this elevator going to take us directly to the top floor?"

"Near as I can tell, based on what I saw on the display. I'm not sure what we might run into once we get out, but it seems like it'll take us a while to get there. I could be wrong, though, so we should all rest up while we can."

Heat snorted once more, then sat down and rested his head against his knees. Lupa rested his head on his hand, eyes closed as if lost in thought. Argilla and Jinana had nestled up together against one wall, leaning against each other.

Serph sat down as well, closing his eyes as fragmented thoughts bounced around his head. The console panel flashed brightly, showing the time remaining until they reached their destination. The red digital display left its slowly fading imprint on the back of his eyelids.

Silver eyes, he thought. *The cat had silver eyes.*

Just like mine.

On reflex, he brought a hand over his own eyes, but his eyelids were too heavy to lift; he merely brushed his eyelashes with his fingertips.

Just what was that cat? Why did it keep appearing wherever he went, doing such strange things? Whatever it was, it didn't seem to be involved with the Church, or with Angel and the Avatar.

The creature's gaze had awoken something inside of Serph. It had appeared before him not to inform him of something, but to make him remember. Seraphita and Seraphitus, a pair od matching passwords. Serph had no idea what they meant-- he'd simply *known* the words.

Thinking about it made him remember something Sera had often said soon after she'd arrived in the Junkyard. *"I don't understand the things I say; I just know that they're true."* Right now, Serph was feeling just like Sera had. His hands had simply typed in the right password, one he shouldn't possibly have known.

A fierce sense of anxiety made his throat tighten. He found himself doubting his own memories, his own existence. The Avatar, that man with black eyes so full of malice, wearing Serph's face-- who was he? What was his connection to the Embryon leader? He had black hair-- just like Sera, black hair, and black eyes...

Serph and his companions had assumed that Varin Omega had begun calling himself 'Colonel' because the Avatar had driven him mad, forcing another man's memories into his head. If that was true, then just what was this strange knowledge that lay within Serph, and where had it come from? Was he like Varin Omega, somehow possessed? Were his actions under the control of someone who had assumed the form of this 'cat'?

"Serph."

He came back into the moment as someone shook him gently by the shoulder. At some point, Lupa had moved alongside him; now he looked at Serph with concern in his eyes. "Don't lose yourself in worry; this isn't the time or place. Right now, you need to keep your focus forward. Don't give in to any distractions."

"Lupa..."

"You're the team leader, Serph." The older warrior squeezed Serph's arm firmly. "Your decisions determine whether we live or die. Sure, the rule that says the leader's death spells the

death of the tribe is gone-- and if you *do* die, we'll still carry on-- but we'll have a hard time completing the mission without you. Stay strong, Serph of the Embryon. Was the old me the sort of man to waffle in the face of danger?"

The steel-cold intensity of his stare cut through Serph like a knife.

"No, Lupa, he wasn't. Thank you. For getting me to open my eyes." A smile crept its way onto Serph's lips, and he shook his head to drive away his pesky sense of hesitation. "There'll be plenty of time to think later. Right now, we need to rescue Sera, and then figure out who's hiding behind the Church."

"That's right. No matter how we were born, or made, or what sort of place we may have been created in, we're alive, here and now, to challenge the Church and the heavens themselves. That's the important thing, Serph: that we're here, of our own wills."

He slapped Serph on the back; then the steely look faded behind a smile. "It looks like I've got quite the 'sons'. You and Heat are fine warriors. The old me chose well. He would be so, so proud of both of you."

"Don't say things like that, Lupa." Driven by a sudden unease he couldn't explain, Serph reached out to clutch Lupa's shoulder. "I'm nowhere near at the level you are. There are still so many things I want you to teach me-- and so many things for us to remember."

"Yes, I suppose so," Lupa said, catching Serph's hand in midair and nonchalantly pushing it away before moving back to where he'd been sitting. "When all this is over, we'll have plenty of time for you to reminisce and tell stories of the past. But to do that, you must be strong *now*, Serph. Because when we're done, I know I'll want to remember you back when you were wet behind the ears."

"Hey, come on, cut that out!"

The elevator continued to ascend soundlessly. They had left the dome far behind, and were now traveling through a dark cylindrical tube, illuminated only by dim light from an unknown source.

Argilla and Jinana had both fallen asleep; they lay breathing quietly. Heat was still as a statue, his eyes closed. The light kissed his red hair and made it look like glowing embers.

Serph glanced at the console. According to the readout, it would be just over an hour before they arrived. He wrapped his arms around his knees, the sound of Varuna writhing within him pulsing in his ears.

The sound of a clear chime awoke Serph from a shallow sleep. He sat up quickly, abashed that he'd drifted off.

"You will arrive at your destination, the seventh floor of the tower level, in thirty seconds," said the chipper electronic voice. "Please note that upon disembarking, this cabin will

automatically return to the first floor of the ground level, and you will need to reenter the command to summon it again. Thank you for traveling with us."

"Sure likes to yammer a lot for a machine," Heat grumbled, emerging from a slumber of his own. He stretched and let out a huge, unabashed yawn.

The elevator slid smoothly and soundlessly along, much like the moving transfer platforms that led into the Temple sanctum-- but a marked contrast to the loud and rickety cargo loaders and other conveyances found elsewhere in the Junkyard. It appeared that none of Serph's team had been roused during the entire time they'd been in transit.

"There could be warrior priests lying in ambush outside of this elevator," the Embryon leader said as the capsule began to slow. "Everyone, be ready to call upon your powers at a moment's notice. Just ten more seconds... Six, five, four, three, two..."

Blue light enveloped Serph's arm as it changed into the blue-white form of Varuna's. Heat likewise transformed one of his arms into that of Agni, and Lupa got down on one knee, one hand covered in steel-gray fur, ready to launch fire on command. Jinana and Argilla stood together, their soft auras of blue and gold light overlapping as they stared fixedly at the door.

The elevator came to a stop and the door slid open.

"You have reached the seventh floor. Thank you for traveling with us."

With that, the machine went quiet. The remaining time indicator displayed 00:00:00, blinking as if to urge the occupants to disembark; but Serph hesitated just inside the doorway. Atma-arm at the ready, he expanded his beyond-human senses of sight and hearing, pushing them to their limits as he scanned the area to the best of his ability in his current form. There was nothing there-- or, at the very least, nothing living that he could sense.

Lupa also drew close to the opening and silently indicated that he, too, had detected no enemy presence. His eyes narrowed and his nose wrinkled; he bared his front teeth as he sniffed the air, just as Cerberus would have. "I don't smell the scent I got from those turret machines we ran into downstairs," he said. "I don't think the priests ever expected intruders to make it this high up. For now, I think it's at least safe to leave the elevator."

"All right. From here on out, it looks like we have to climb our way up on foot." Serph stepped carefully onto the landing outside and the others followed suit. Once they had all gotten off, the doors to the elevator closed automatically, and it began to head back down.

"Whoa," Argilla gasped. "Look how high up we are."

Unlike the darkened, sealed-off tower levels, the seventh floor of the topmost level of the tower felt open and exposed. The walls were made of reinforced glass, built to withstand high-altitude winds, and affording an unobstructed view of everything down below. The elevator had dropped them off at a simple, circular landing; the only way further up was a spiral staircase that rose at a shallow angle. Ornamented pillars were set in place every few meters around the circumference of the reinforced glass walls, forming the design of the thorny crown that was the seal of the Church.

"Look. The Junkyard looks so small."

From the top of the spire, the Junkyard really did look like little more than a playground. What down below seemed like an endless expanse of battlefields now appeared small enough to fit into the palm of a human hand. The countless ruins that jutted from the ground were little more than clusters of points, impossible to discern from one another with the naked eye. Even the grand white gardens of Sahasrara, directly below, looked no bigger than a fingertip.

"So, that's where we've been fighting this whole time," Jinana muttered as she sidled up alongside Argilla, who was standing close to the glass. Her green eyes gazed out with loneliness toward the Maribel's dominion of Manipura. "We killed and were killed in turn all to capture tiny sections of someplace that small? How many of us died for this?"

"And meanwhile, every day, people were looking down at us from up here," Heat spat. "It makes me want to wring their scrawny necks. Just what did they think of us?"

"I'm guessing we were the subject of some grand experiment," Lupa chimed in with disgust. "The appearance and spread of Atma might have been only one small part of a bigger scheme. Maybe they had to start interfering when things rampaged outside the bounds of what they anticipated... or maybe Sera's arrival was some unprecedented factor, and they panicked and decided they needed to take steps to fight back."

"Shouldn't we be moving on?" Argilla said. "Mick might have made it to the top of the tower already."

"She's right. We can't afford to delay any--" Serph stopped in mid-sentence as a twinkling light in the distance caught his eye.

Jinana turned to look at him, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

Serph stepped up to the wall, setting his forehead against the transparent barrier. Something was flying right towards them at a phenomenal speed. Within moments it was close enough for his eyes to make out what he was seeing, and he called out as recognition dawned. "It's Cielo--and Gale!"

"What?" gasped Heat.

It was unmistakably Dyaus soaring their way from across the pale gray sky. Hanging beneath him, holding on tight, was Vayu. The span of a single breath later, the two seemed close enough to reach out and tough. They could see Dyaus' mouth open in a shout.

Serph acted instantly. "Everyone, get down!" he yelled, conjuring Varuna into his right arm and thrusting his arm-blade for all he was worth into the spot in the wall where Dyaus was headed.

Reinforced glass, strong enough to resist gale force winds, split apart like it was mere tissue paper. A howling gust scattered the shards over his four companions as they shrank away from it, quickly covering their heads. Dyaus came hurtling through the gap that had been made, braking with his wings at the last instant; tangled with Vayu, he went tumbling across the floor.

As they landed, the pair also emerged from their transformations. Now in human form, buffeted by the wind and covered in fragments of broken glass, Cielo and Gale lay for a moment like dead things, then began panting roughly.

Argilla hurried over to them. "What in the world are you doing here? Why aren't you at headquarters? Did something happen?"

"Hey, buddy," Cielo managed, struggling to get up. His youthful face was awash with shock and exhaustion and pale with despair he couldn't possibly hide. Serph rushed to his side and knelt to help him up, but Cielo instead flung himself into Serph's arms.

"Why?" Cielo bawled, his voice cracking. "I couldn't do anything... Everyone was dying, and I was right there but I couldn't do anything. I tried to save them, I did, but I couldn't, and I just-- why couldn't I save just one person, boss? Why? Why-- I--"

His words degenerated into an unintelligible wail, and he pressed his tear-streaked face into Serph's chest, sobbing uncontrollably. Warm tears soaked into Serph's shirt as he stood, dazed. *His people, the other tribesmen he'd left stationed back at headquarters, dead?*

"Gale, what happened?"

"I have failed you, sir." Gale picked himself up slowly. He looked just as exhausted as Cielo, his pallid face even more expressionless than usual, frozen into a vacant mask. "I was too late in getting out the warning. I underestimated the probability that the aberration of which Lupa informed us, which had caused the disaster in Vishuddha, might attack the other areas as well. The blame for this lies on me, sir."

"Again," Lupa said, the sound catching in his throat. "Gale, you're speaking of that *thing*, aren't you-- the black sludge?"

"I am," Gale replied, averting his eyes. "We were already besieged when I became aware of its presence. Our men and their Atma put up a valiant defense, but we were no match for it. The black substance broke through the barricaded entrances to the sewer system like they were nothing."

"My people." Jinana took a staggering step forward. The blood drained from her trembling lips, as if in fear of the answer to her next question. "The ones who were at headquarters-- what has become of them?"

Gale took a heavy breath. "Wiped out, all of them," he said, straining to keep an even tone. "We tried to save them, but... to no avail. The enemy's sheer mass and volume had become too much. In all likelihood, most of the people were swallowed up when the attack first began, before they even realized what was happening-- and yet we were unable to get into position to rescue even the few who had survived the--"

His words were cut off as Jinana grabbed him by the neck with a throttling grip. Her green eyes smoldered with a sorrow and a rage beyond words.

"Jinana, stop it!" Lupa barked, grabbing her arms and pulling them away. "Gale did all he could. I know what it's like to fight this thing. There was no way that he and Cielo could possibly have saved everyone-- it's a miracle enough that the two of them escaped and made it here. Do not blame them."

Jinana stood glaring at Gale for a long moment, then shover him away with a muted sob. Turning, she threw herself into Argilla's outstretched arms and pressed her head against her friend's chest, choking with tears. Gale stumbled as he was pushed away, and slumped visibly.

He looked to Serph. "I will accept whatever reprimand you deem fit, sir. I should have been more careful. It was I that you placed in command of our defenses, and so the blame for the annihilation of our soldiers and the destruction of our base lies with me. What is your punishment, sir?"

"There's no punishment needed," Serph said, stroking the top of Cielo's head as the boy continued to sob. He struggled to process all that he'd just heard. *The soldiers back at base-- his tribe-- had been wiped out. All of them.* "Right now, I'm just grateful that at least the two of you managed to get away safely. Has the entire base, and all of Manipura, really been overrun by the muck?"

"When Cielo and I made out escape, our headquarters was completely engulfed by the substance," Gale said, shaking his head. He brushed aside Serph's offered hand as he stood up straight again. "I believe that the other areas of the Junkyard will suffer the same fate sooner or later, if they have not already. Calling back our personnel on guard in the other areas due to out lack of manpower in the wake of Varin Omega's attack proved to be our undoing."

"So what you're saying is that we're all that's left," Heat spat. "The seven of us. The only people left in the whole Junkyard." The weeping Cielo choked on his tears and looked up at him with a start. The man who was host to Agni was, even now, wearing his out-of-place smile; he gazed upwards, towards the gates of paradise that were now so very close.

"Gale, the sludge has already made its way into Sahasrara as well," Serph said. He kept a firm grip on Cielo as he spoke, feeling the boy tremble.

Gale's eyes widened ever so slightly. "Here? You mean to say that you have encountered it as well, sir?"

Serph nodded, and quickly related his team's recent experiences, from being cast down beneath the inner sanctum by the Dissemination Machine, to arrival at the Newborn production facility, and then to the massive wave of black ooze that had emerged from the water.

"We have to assume that this muck has already laid waste to the entire Junkyard," he said. "The Church's Dissemination Machine system, as well as the Samsara system that creates Newborns, have fallen into complete disarray; I'm not sure whether that happened because of the muck got into them or not, but regardless, before long, not even Sahasrara or this very tower are going to be safe.

"Gale, Cielo, you need to stop blaming yourselves for what happened. You did everything that you could; if you'd tried to do anything else, you'd have died in Manipura, and the rest of us wouldn't have known what happened to our friends or to the Junkyard. We would probably have wound up dying here in this tower as a result. Cielo, Gale-- you've gone above and beyond, truly, both of you."

"Oh, boss!" Cielo lifted his head; tears had made a mess of his face. He wiped clumsily at his cheeks with the back of one hand. "I finally understand, now, having to watch while people die, unable to do anything-- I know now how much it hurts to not be able to save them."

Serph opened his mouth to reply, but Cielo went on in a rush. "This feeling-- this is what Sera has been suffering through this whole time, isn't it?"

"Cielo, I--"

"That's why we're going to save her, boss." Cielo rubbed at his puffy, red eyes; his voice hoarse, but his tone was resolved. "I swear I'm going to save Sera if no one else. Never again, boss-- never again am I going to just let myself get stuck flying around doing nothing but cry helplessly while there are people dying right there and--"

"You did your duty," Serph said, resting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "So did Gale. And you took decisive action by coming to give your leader your report. We *will* rescue Sera. All of the core members of the Embryon are here, now, and so are Jinana and Lupa. There's no way we can lose."

"That's right," Argilla said, stepping in close. "So enough with the waterworks, huh, kiddo?" The corners of her own eyes were bright, but her tears had already dried. "We're going to save Sera, and then we're going to Nirvana. Otherwise, everything Sera has done-- and everything our friends did, who paid the ultimate price-- will have been for nothing."

Cielo simply stared up at Argilla for a few moments. Then he gave a slow, determined nod, pushed away from Serph and got to his feet. "Sorry, boss. She's right-- we can't let ourselves stop now that we've come this far."

"That's the spirit," Lupa said, clapping Cielo on the back as the boy rubbed once more at his eyes. "At least now we know what happened at the base and to our people." He glanced at the stairway that led upward. "Whoever's behind this Church, they're going to wish I didn't have a new reason to confront them."

Cielo sniffed, rubbed at his red eyes some more, and then started up the staircase. His gait was solid, unfaltering.

"Gale," Serph asked, turning to his bishop, who still stood forlornly, a few paces from the others. "We'll settle this once and for all at the top of this tower-- right in front of the gates of the false paradise they've promised us."

Gale stared down at the hand his leader had extended to him.

And then a strange light flashed in his emerald eyes, and he grabbed hold of that hand, letting Serph lead him to the stairs. Heat followed along, unhurried; then came Lupa, and then Argilla and Jinana.

The seven survivors of the Junkyard had few words as they began to make they began to make their way upward, helping to support one another along the way.

They had scarcely started their ascent when Gale. from his position in the middle of the group, abruptly turned to look back over his shoulder, his eyes going wide. Serph paused. "What's the matter, Gale?"

"We are in danger; we must take urgent action." Gale pulled his hand free of Serph's and transformed on the spot. Vayu jumped forth sporting his emerald wings. The others. not sensing a threat, remained dumbstruck. "Abnormal sounds are closing in on our position," the bishop continued hurriedly. "We have incoming from the elevator shaft and the tower's exterior walls, multiple-- no, they have fused as one. I believe it is..." Vayu's head wavered, mouth gaping. "It is the black substance, advancing on our position, heading to the top of the spire."

"Everybody, run!" Serph commanded, and immediately transformed. The blue-white form of Varuna stepped into line with Vayu. "Heat, change into Agni and help me stall this thing here temporarily; in the meantime, Lupa, change to Cerberus and head upward with the others."

"I can still fight, boss-- as Dyaus!"

"Now is not the time to underestimate Vayu's capabilities, sir."

Cielo and Gale issued their protest at the same time. Like Gale, Cielo had already activated his Atma.

"No," Serph insisted. "You're both far too exhausted after your escape from Manipura. We'll stay here until we think we've bought you enough time to reach the top, and then we'll follow. Go!"

"He's right," Agni said as he strode forward, cracking his knuckles. "Get going, Lupa. We'll handle this foule ooze. It'll make for a nice little warmup."

Lupa's eyebrows went up, and he opened his mouth, but before he could speak the light from the elevator shaft began to flicker uncontrollably and the door burst from its hinges. Goopy sludge began to gush from the shaft. Soon sticky droplets of tar were wriggling wormlike towards where Serph and Heat had taken up rear guard position.

Agni roared and hurled a huge fireball toward the open doorway, incinerating the sludge that was oozing through it. Varuna jumped forward, brushing aside the collapsing cinders, and unleashed his chilling energy on the welling muck beyond, plugging the doorway with a solid, frost-covered lump. "Lupa, hurry!" he shouted.

But Lupa did not retreat.

Working together, Varuna and Agni were surely capable of delaying the horrific foe before them-- but not for anywhere as long as Cerberus could. And if the sludge creeping its way up the outside of the tower joined up with the mass that was pouring out through the elevator shaft, the pair wouldn't stand a chance. All this was plain on Lupa's face.

Varuna snarled angrily. "What are you doing, Lupa? I told you to run! Go!" The block of frost had already begun melting, and fresh tendrils of black ooze were slithering around languidly in search or prey. "Hurry up and--"

"Granato..." It was not Lupa, but rather Jinana who had spoken. She staggered forward, still in human form, her wide eyes fixed on a single point.

The surface of the charred and frozen muck warped and bulged outward, large black globs protruding from it in recognizable shapes. One by one they took human form, faces slumped and arms raised, wailing mouths opened cavernously wide.

"Granato," Jinana repeated. "Zaphir. Fonte. Mel. Laska. All of you..."

"Canis Volk," Lupa murmured in dismay. "Canard... Elk. Vande, Ada, Olber."

Agni swung one of his arms, unleashing an arc of flame; the encroaching sludge recoiled. Along with the putrid stench of seared flesh, there now came wails of pain and lamentation, filling the chamber and echoing form the shaft below, and even further, so that they seemed to cry from all the way from the ground below. And still the quivering mass continued to take on

new shapes, one after the other. It melted and shifted, crudely forming barely recognizable recreations of faces that gaped and beckoned.

"Lupa, no! They're not the people they used to be!"

"Jinana, get back! Come back over here!" Argilla shouted, forcing her way past Cielo and Gale. "They're not the people you used to know anymore; they're just empty husks taken over by that ooze! Both of you, please-- come with us and do what Serph says!"

"Stand down, Lupa! That's an order!" Serph shouted, freezing the legs of the lumbering mud-mannequins in place. Still attempting to advance, their upper bodies collapsed forward, crushing their own frozen and fractured legs-- and from those remnants, the forms of the departed rose up and reappeared, former friends with their faces twisted in unrelenting agony, despair and terror.

"I repeat, that is an order-- both of you! Listen to me!" Serph cried out, so loud that he felt his throat would burst. "Lupa! Get away from those things now and take the others upstairs!"

The broad man in front of him wavered.

"Lupa!"

A moment later, Lupa swung out his arm.

It was the arm of Cerberus, steely and strong, and it easily snatched up both Varuna and Agni, hurling them back to where Argilla was standing. They landed hard, collapsing to a heap on the floor before they even had a chance to cry out, and came free from their transformations.

"Boss!"

"Sir, are you all right?"

Both Cielo and Gale rushed to them. Serph pushed aside an offered hand and got to his feet.

Heat did likewise, anger burning in his eyes. "What are you doing? Trying to cut in on my fun? You know I don't show any mercy to anyone who tried to get in my way. Or hadn't you heard?"

The mud simulacra continued to amble forward, greater in number now. Lupa strode toward them, Jinana beside him. Their shoulders were squared, their chest held high; their steps never wavered.

"I'm sorry, Serph. I cannot obey that order." Lupa's voice was soft. "That's Canis Volk, and the other Newbies-- my friends-- that I escaped with. I can't just leave them like this."

"No matter what form they've been changed into, or if their hearts and minds have been lost, these are still me people-- my friends," Jinana added. "I am Jinana, leader of Maribel. I cannot leave my people behind to be manipulated even after their deaths. It is my duty as leader to send them to their final rest."

Argilla took another step forward, her voice pleading. "Lupa, Jinana... dammit!"

Heat attempted to transform, but grunted in frustration as his Atma refused his command. The repeated series of battles he'd been through had left him exhausted. The brand of Agni on his arm flickered weakly before its light died; he would need to rest for a time before he could transform again. Serph was in the same condition; no matter how many times he repeated the transformation command in his head, Varuna merely pulsed feebly, and remained silent.

"Lupa, I order you to get back!" Serph shouted frantically. He knew that his words were falling on deaf ears, but he couldn't help himself. He felt as if he were caught in a terrible dream, watching powerlessly, just as he had done in a far-off memory-- simply watching as the man he most admired advanced to meet his death. "If you recognize me as your leader, then follow my orders! You promised me that when this was all over, we'd talk about the past together! You said that in the elevator, just now! Don't tell me you don't remember! I still need you, Lupa!"

"Serph..."

For an instant, his vision was bathed in bright red, and he felt a gust of searing wind. A crashing boom made his ears ring. Cielo stumbled beside him, and then hurriedly scrambled back. Gale grabbed onto Serph's shoulder and dragged him higher up the stairs.

In a flash, Lupa had used Cerberus' flame to blast a wide gape in the staircare, cutting off Jinana and himself from Serph and the others. The floor fell out completely between them, dropping down into an unfathomable darkness. Without the use of Atma, there was no way they could hope to jump across.

"You asked me once, Serph, why I chose the two of you." One swing, and Cerberu's arm was overflowing with flame. "I don't know for sure what the old me was thinking, and I don't have any proof." The wind blew from outside again, making Lupa's braids flutter. He swung out with his other arm, making the encroaching mud-mannequins retreat momentarily. New simulcra were still appearing, warped faces staring as they tried to surround him. "But I think I know, now, what he was thinking, Serph. I think I wanted to leave behind some proof that I had lived."

"Lupa, you--"

"Not as something the Church tried to mold me into, someone who did nothing but struggle to reach some mysterious, invisible paradise--" He warded off the sludge-figures with another quick gout of flame-- "But proof that I'd lived as someone *I* wanted to be."

"You can tell me all about that later. Just come with me! Hurry! Please!"

"I can't say for sure that that's why the old me chose you, and I'm sorry for not being able to remember." Lupa cast a quick look back over his shoulder, a faint smile on his face. "But seeing the two of you now, I think I'm pretty sure. The old me saw something in you. You're a fine warrior, Serph, and a great leader. I think you might be stronger than the old me ever would've expected-- both you and Heat. There's nothing more I can do for you now; now, the new me has to do what *he* must."

"That's why I'm telling you to come with us!" Serph pounded his fist on the ground in frustration. "The other members of the Embryon, my people-- they've been swallowed up by that ooze while making sure that *we* stayed alive, and--"

"There's another one of your friends who still needs you to save her." Lupa's tone had become suddenly harsher.

Serph's throat tightened. "Sera."

"Isn't she still a member of the Embryon? She's in grave danger, but at least she's still alive."

Further above, Serph knew, was the apex of the spire-- along with the bridge of the heavens that led to paradise. The girl was probably up there, right now, abducted and alone, at the mercy of the enemy with no means of defending herself.

"But Jinana, I..." Argilla wrung her hands together. "I still want to spend more time with you, talking and laughing. Remember? You said that when we got to Nirvana, there'd be no more fighting, no more devouring, and we could just have fun together."

"Forgive me, Argilla, but-- I am the leader of the Maribel." There was a kind smile on Jinana's face as she turned to look back at her friend. "I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise. Please tell Sera for me, as well. I wish we could have been in paradise together. Argilla, I am so happy that I met you and Sera both."

Argilla leaned forward as if contemplating a leap-- but she was forced to hop backward as another blast of Cerberus' flames became a warding wall of fire right in front of her. "You know there isn't any time, Serph," came Lupa's hardened voice from beyond the flames. "We will put an end to our comrades here; you need to go and help your own friend. Don't disappoint me now! You two are the sons that I chose, and I've seen with my own eyes how much the two of you have grown. Serph, Heat-- don't let that all end here!"

"But--!"

"Serph, we have to go." Serph felt a rough grip on his arm, and reflexively tried to shake it off, but the fingers only dug in more painfully. He looked up to see Heat, his lips tightly pursed. "They're right. We still have to go and save Sera. You're the one who decreed that she was a member of the Embryon. Would you renounce her now?"

"Heat, let go of me!" Serph struggled, but Heat refused to release his hold. Another whirlwind of flame enveloped the area before them, wiping out several of the mud simulacra.

"Serph!" Lupa scolded one final time from the other side of that wall of fire. "Aim for the heavens-- and when you get there, tear out the Church's throat. Let that be my final and only expectation of you."

All of the energy drained from Serph's body. He could only stand numbly as Heat and Gale took hold of him from either side. They began to drag him up stairs; Argilla followed, pushed by Cielo, who was gritting his teeth and fighting back tears.

"Argilla! Tell Sera that we will meet again," Jinana called out as her body was enveloped in pale blue light. In her place appeared the brilliantly gleaming Ushas, her golden hair waving. "Next time, it will be underneath the blue sky of Nirvana. Together, we'll all look up at the sun, and at the moon and the stars-- we'll see all of the beautiful things that Sera told us about."

"Jinana, no!"

Argilla was openly weeping now as Gale, Heat and Cielo continued to push her and Serph further up the stairs. Just as Lupa and Jinana were about to disappear from view beneath the twisting staircase, Serph turned his head to look back one last time-- and then he saw it.

As if to say farewell, Lupa raised up his hand, and through the haze of ruddy light, Serph saw the tag ring that marked him as the leader of the Wolves set firmly around his finger.

He took a breath, but was unable to find his voice. All he could do was fix his eyes on his old commander for one moment longer. Then he took another step, and Lupa was gone.

There was a tremendous blast and a blistering wave of heat from below. Walls crumbled, and the ceiling caved in. Serph realized that he was shouting something incoherent. Like the vestives of a dream, the broad form of Lupa's back fluttered on the insides of his eyelids, but his open eyes saw only dust and ruin. Hands grabbed at him from every direction, hauling him bodily up the staircase. Now the way was blocked off by a mound of rubble; even more of the stairway had collapsed.

"Sir." Gale was at his side. "Sir, are you all right?"

"Yeah..." He was barely aware of his own response. Heat was still holding firmly onto his arm, staring out into the open sky, crimson eyes burning as he fought back something inside of him.

Serph felt something moving against his cheek, and he reached up to wipe at his face. His fingertips came away wet. Warm droplets streaked down from the corners of his eyes, trailing their warmth in their wake.

Tears, Serph thought. *Tears, like the ones that Sera and Argilla and Cielo had shed.*

Serph has not realized that little drops from his eyes could claw so powerfully at the very core of his being. -- No, the heart-rending surge of emotion was probably itself the cause of these tears. His throat grew so tight that he doubted he could speak. It hust to breathe. When he opened his mouth, he felt a wordless scream welling up inside him; he bit down hard on his lip to keep it in.

A hot pulsing started up in his cheek. Varuna had begun to reawaken in response to his bearer's powerful emotions. Next to him, he could feel Heat's body temperature rising sharply as Agni stirred within him, the fireball-shaped Atma brand that had earlier gone dim now blazing a bright blood-red.

"We're continuing with the mission," Serph choked out at last, forcing the words out one at a time with all the resolve he could muster. He shook his head to cast off the anguished thoughts that were clouding his mind and set his hand atop Heat's, which was still gripping his arm.

Then he fixed his gaze upwards, toward the entryway to the heavens themselves, now practically within's arm reach.

"We are going to defy the heavens, the Church, paradise-- and the gods themselves," he murmured fiercely. "That is my order as Serph, leader of the Embryon. Do you hear me?"

He closed his eyes, and thought of that final glimpse he had gotten of the tag ring on Lupa's finger.

"Yes, sir," his people replied in unison.

A bright white light shone down from the top of the stairs, its glow splitting the gloom around it like a blade.

"My, my. You're rather late, aren't you, Mick the Slug-- leader of the Solids?"

"Huh?" Mick lifted his head with a start at the sudden, mocking voice from up above. He looked around warily. At long last, he had managed to reach the top of the tower. The energy he'd gained from eating Bat was not all but spent, and even his ability to think was steadily degrading.

About all that remained inside his addled head was the thought of dragging Sera to the top of this tower and handing her over to the Church in order to gain admittance to the gates of paradise. He had forgotten about Serph and the others-- not simply the possibility that they might follow him, but their very existence. The wings he had usurped from Bat had become bent and twisted, and they had started to evaporate into nothingness at the edges, as if heatlessly burning away, but he hadn't noticed that, yet, either.

He stumbled the final few meters to the top. Compared to the grandiosity of the Temple below, the top of the tower was rather bleak and desolate. The round, largely unadorned plaza was encircled by a meter-high wall. Near the far side of the open space, to the left of where he stood, a staircase led up to a raised platform. There appeared to be nothing on top of the platform. A strong, chill wind blew across the empty rooftop.

"W-Who... Who're you?" Mick asked, finding his words at last. Next to the vacant platform there stood a man clad in a white suit.

He wore goggles that covered his face from his nose on up, and in their lenses were reflected the image of a groveling monstrosity and an unconscious young girl. The man's lustrous black hair remained completely unruffled despite the fierce wind. It was as if the very laws of physics were incapable of affecting him.

"Oh dear, have you forgotten me? Then again, I suppose you really only caught a glimpse when we met at the Colonel's place-- oh, that poor, poor little puppet!-- and really, things were rather hectic at the time, after all. I assume that's Sera you've brought with you?"

"I... Y-Yeah." Finally remembering the girl he had tucked under his arm, Mick tossed her onto the floor in front of him. "Yeah, sh-she's... she's the girl you've been l-l-looking for. I've d-d-done as you... asked. N-Nirva...na..."

Mick held out his hand, twisted into an awkward shape. The blackening at the edges of his wings was spreading, now affecting his deformed arm and his side. His body was consuming itself.

"Br-Bring me... to p-paradise. I brought you... brought you the girl. P-Paradise is... mine. Nir... Nirva...na. The para... paradise you p-promised."

"You truly are disgusting." The corner of the man's lips crooked up sharply, and then they twisted into a smile. "Really, you're so foul it's hard to even look at you. If nothing else, the Colonel would have done a tidy job of bringing the girl back here, and I wouldn't be stuck having to deal with a putrid piece of filth like yourself... but oh, I supposed that can't really be helped. I'll take Sera now, if you don't mind. Much obliged."

"Nirva...na... Paradise. Nirva--"

"Oh, do please shut up," the man said with a dismissive wave of his hand. The sigil of the Church on his white glove glowed with blue light.

"Nir...van--"

In the end, Mick didn't even have time to get the whole word out. As he tried to crawl up to the man, his body stretched out into formless, tacky strands. Bewildered, he held his hand up, and watched as his palm melted like ice that had been sprinkled with salt.

"And now your usefulness has come to an end. I'd really prefer not to have your disgusting form lying here in my presence, either. Be gone from my sight, puppet." A cold smile crossed the man's lips as he held up a fist, extended his thumb, and jabbed it downward. The part of Mick that had managed to retain its form squelched under the man's foot.

Without so much as a single scream-- without even comprehending what had happened to him-- Mick the Slug was reduced to a festering puddle.

With a soft moan, Sera's limp form shifted ever so slightly on the floor. She shook her head, rolled onto her side, and went into a brief coughing fit. Then she clutched her hands against her chest, shivering. The man watched her with mild disinterest.

After several moments she slowly sat up, and gazed around with a look of bewilderment, taking in her unfamiliar surroundings. She caught sight of the reeking puddle nearby, and jerked away from it.

"Are you awake now, goddess?"

Still shaking, Sera spun around to see the man standing there. She let out a gasp, then covered her mouth with both hands as if to keep her voice in.

The Avatar-- the white-clad man who was manipulating the Church.

Barely a moment later, however, the fear and shock that had come to the girl's small face vanished, replaced instead by a pallor of rage and defiance. Her stare of defiance looked fragile, and her legs still trembled as she struggled to her feet, leaning against the wall; but she pursed her lips tightly together and glared at the man with a dark fire in her eyes. "You did this, didn't you?"

"Yes." The Avatar's tone was indifferent. He cast the briefest of glances at the pool of black tar that had been Mick. "Just what are you so upset about? This was the man who so rudely abducted you, a villain who got his grubby paws all over you and dragged you here against your will. A little gratitude is in order, I'd say. But then, I guess you were always like that-- a fickle, unpredictable little goddess, more selfish than anyone could imagine. And now, thanks to you, here we are, forced to go through all this trouble."

"Where are the others?" Sera leaned forward. Her legs were still shaking, and she seemed too weak to step away from the wall, but she locked her elbows, squared her shoulders, and forced herself to speak up. "What did you do with the rest of the Embryon? What happened to Serph and Heat and Cielo and Argilla and the rest? And what about Jinana and Lupa? Where are they?"

"I don't rightly know," the man said with a shrug. "They may even be on their way to come get you as we speak, though I doubt they'll actually make it here. In any event, there isn't much time left, as I'm sure you know."

With his thumb still extended, he swung his arm in a circle, carving a portal out of thin air, a frameless window through which she could see a view of the Junkyard from high above. Sera took several involuntary steps closer, as if being reeled in, and let out a sharp gasp. "What is that?"

"Why, a mass of karma." The Avatar let out a throaty chuckle.

She could see the image of a massive tsunami of sticky blackness cresting over the horizon, slowly but steadily sweeping its way across the entire Junkyard. A chorus of despairing wails was carried along on a putrid wind. The substance moved at a furious speed, sweeping over recognizable landmarks far down below, coming in from every direction. First it swallowed up the Wolves' territory of Vishuddha, and then moved on to engulf everything else that Serph and his people had ever known, starting with the dominion of the Embryon itself. Another similar wave of destruction began to flow up from beneath the Temple itself.

"Originally, Samsara was only designed to filter and record the military records and combat experience of Asura AIs, and to create new units with randomly assigned statuses," the Avatar said, scarcely glancing at Sera as she backed away. With a swipe of his hand, he dispelled the image. "But thanks to you, coming down here into the Junkyard, these simple combat programs manifested needless self-awareness and personalities, developing into a whole slew of extraneous things that Samsara was no longer equipped to process. And what you just saw is the result: a conglomeration of fear-- of being killed, of being eaten-- along with suffering, hatred, animosity-- all on top of hunger, hunger and more hunger, and yet more hunger still."

Sera let out a meek little yelp and covered both of her ears.

"This is all yet another product of your selfishness, goddess." The man's laughter echoed long and loud. "If only you'd never come to this place, these people would never have known sin or pain or sadness. They lived in ignorant bliss here in this bloodstained Eden, knowing only ways of war. But then *you* had to give them the fruit of wisdom, opening their eyes to more. You made them aware of the blood on their hands and the wretchedness of their own existence-- of the fact that they were nothing but Atma, demons of battle who lived only to kill and devour one another."

"Stop it..."

"Stop what? All I'm trying to do is explain to a stubborn little goddess exactly what it is she's done. Have you not stopped even once to think about just how much suffering you brought upon humanity?"

"Stop it!" Sera screamed, shaking her head furiously, hands clamped over her ears.

At that very moment, heaven and earth shook. Red lightning split the gray Junkyard sky, snuffing out the glittering pinpoints of green light above. The tower itself shifted, as if it were being thrust upward, then continued to shake with powerful tremors. Even the Avatar was taken off guard, and he staggered before catching himself against the stairs that led up to the platform.

"Oh, dear me," he muttered, astonished, his head tilted forward. "You never cease to amaze me, goddess. You may have never learned your manners, but you've certainly developed quite

the edo and temper. And you still don't have the slightest inkling of what you're doing, or how much trouble you cause for everyone else."

Sera took no notice of the Avatar's muttered words. No longer was she propping herself up against the wall; anger had flushed her cheeks crimson, and her black eyes radiated an energy intense as plasma. "Change everything back to normal!" She bunched her hands into tiny fists at her sides. "Change the Junkyard back to the way it was! Erase that black ooze from this world, and stop making everyone do such terrible things. I am Sera of the Embryon, and I'm not going to let anyone hurt the people I consider my friends!"

"Change things back? Oh, that's quite impossible, I'm afraid." The Avatar waved one hand, keeping the other braced against the stairs. "It's like I just told you, goddess. Technoshaman Seraphita: the Atma phenomenon that has spread through the Junkyard, and its byproduct, that-- ah, let's call it abomination of pure karma-- have only come into being because *you* came into this world."

Sera's lip twitched.

"Are you familiar with supercooled water? Oh, who am I kidding-- is there anything you *don't* know?" Somehow the man managed to make his tone both patronizing and ingratiating. "I'm referring to water that, under certain conditions, is able to retain a liquid state at subzero temperatures. Now, this water requires a phenomenally fine balance for it to remain in liquid form; disrupt that balance even the slightest bit, and the water will freeze solid. You, my goddess, are the ice that forms as the result-- so to speak."

He pointed at Sera with his white-gloved hand. "Or a better analogy might be to say that conditions here within the EGG are like a supersaturated solution of data. From our perspective, you were lost in this high-density data sea, and it became necessary for us to cause some portion of it to precipitate out in order to get our hands on you again."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've never--"

"Still feigning ignorance, I see. The Atma Virus that we sent down here was the proverbial bolt of lightning that struck this sea of highly concentrated data; the impact caused the Asura-- which already possessed sufficient information density to replicate conscious phenomena-- to awaken en masse, exhibiting hitherto repressed state of self-awareness and consciousness. It also 'primed the pump', shall we say, allowing your personality to emerge from this supersaturated solution of data into which it had dissolved."

"No, I-- I came here to help everyone. I--"

"However you may have perceived the experience on your end is of no concern of mine." The Avatar shrugged dismissively. "Though I am somewhat interested in where this desire to 'help everyone' came from. I'm not sure why you'd suddenly be interested in saving other people when you used to be such a coldhearted, uncaring goddess, unable to acknowledge the existence of anything or anyone other than herself."

Sera faltered, unable to form a reply. She bit down hard on her quivering lower lip.

"Everything that's happened here has happened because of you, Technoshaman." A white-gloved fingertip pointed accusingly at the girl. "And now here you are, blaming it on us. If you had just remained under our control, none of this would have happened."

Sera shook her head over and over at the accusation in his words. "I don't understand what you're saying. Aren't you the ones that send me here?"

"You came here entirely of your own free will," the Avatar said offhandedly. "All we're doing is making the best of the opportunity created by your actions. You are a very unique piece of the larger entity we call 'Technoshaman Seraphita' that we've managed to precipitate out from this supersaturated solution of data."

The Avatar studied her for a moment and let out a derisive snort. "What *you* are, right now, Seraphita, is the core of your own self-awareness, somehow separated from the rest of yourself. Your refusal to come back and acknowledge your own material existence makes us unable to retrieve you-- the substantive form of the Technoshaman-- from the probabilistic threshold between existing and not existing across from which you have dispersed. Now that EGG has lost its interface, we can't even form a data contact without repeated coordination of a multi-layered information bias."

Sera shook her head and began to back away. unable or unwilling to understand the words being thrown at her.

"That's why I've had to go through all the trouble of adopting this form to come down here," the man continued. "Without the Technoshaman to act as an intermediary, there's too much risk in establishing a connection from the outside. Even Angel, your own parent, can only operate here for a very brief window of time, and even then, only with multiple layers of shielding. The information density within the EGG is simply too high; an ordinary human brain couldn't hope to stand up to it without you, as the Technoshaman, to act as intermediary to translate and simplify the Word of God."

"Enough of this! I don't want to hear any more!" Sera shouted, clutching her head and shaking it furiously back and forth. "All I want... All I want is to save my friends. Where is everyone? Are they all right? What do I have to do to stop that black wave from swallowing up the Junkyard? Those are the only things I want to know from you; I don't care about anything else you have to say!"

"Why, oh why, must you be such a spoiled little princess who refuses to listen?" The Avatar let out a heavy sigh. "Quite frankly, at this point, there's nothing to be done. The karmic abomination has made its way into the Church, which acts as this world's control system, and caused it to go *out* of control; not even we can do anything about that. There's no point in going into a panic over it now; it's a byproduct of your actions, bringing self-awareness into being here in the Junkyard. The only way to erase it now would be to erase the Junkyard itself, or else wait for it to be swallowed up completely by that chaos of malice and hunger."

Sera dropped to her knees. "No..." Tears began to run slowly from her wide-open black eyes.

"Oh, dear." The Avatar made a bitter face. "It would appear that your friends are more persistent than I thought. We're got Asura making their way up here-- I count five of them, and their identification signals are..." His lips twisted up. "It's the Embryon."

Sera got to her feet, poised as if to run.

"Stop!" the Avatar snapped at her. "If you go to them, just what do you expect to do? After all, you're the one who got them into this whole situation, *Serpahita*. You gave the blissfully ignorant inhabitants of this paradise the forbidden fruit, burdening them with a sense of self and all the suffering and sin that come with it. --Oh, how tires I am of hearing that name, 'Seraphita'. You're no angel-- you're the serpent who crawled into Eden, the Eve who tempted Adam-- don't you see? You want to *save* these people? Don't make me laugh. Nothing can save these people now. Nothing you can do, nothing we can do. Except for one thing."

"What is it?" Sera demanded.

She'd frozen in place, on the verge of sprinting away, and now she turned around and looked back at the Avatar. His slender lips twisted in a cruel smile. With his white-gloved hands, he reached up and slowly removed his googles, revealing the face underneath-- an exact mirror of Serph's save for the color of his hair and eyes. Sera chewed her lips and cast her gaze downward.

"Come with me and leave this world," the Avatar said softly, "and carry out your function as Technoshaman. You are the intermediary for the Word of God. You'll be able to bring the EGG back to its true computational capabilities and restore this twisted world."

"Really?"

"Yes. There's only one little caveat... Given the spread of the corruption, we'll have to do a partial reset, and restore things from a backup made before you came down here."

"And that will save Serph and the others?" Sera's voice was feeble. An assured, triumphant smile appeared on the Avatar's face, so like Serph's but for the hint of cruelty. "If I go with you, then-- I'm not sure I understand you right-- then this... world will go back to normal?"

"Yes-- and the people in it, as well. They'll have no more Atma, no self-awareness, no knowledge of sin. They'll simply be the combat AIs they're supposed to be. Of course, this means they won't remember you, either."

Sera trembled as she looked up at the Avatar.

"You'll need to make sure that you can handle that fact. Your very presence here is something that never should have been. But you can go back to where you belong, fix your mistake, and return this world to the way it was-- a Junkyard never troubled by a wayward goddess, where there was no Atma, no sin and nobody devouring each other. It'll be a tidy little space where the calm and efficient art of war can be carried out unendingly by unsullied puppets. It will be a paradise. These people already lived in Eden, Sera. It was you who drove them out."

"And that will really save Serph and the others?" Sera repeated, her meek voice on the verge of cracking. "Even if they forget about me, and forgot about all that's happened, everyone will be able to go on living as they were? They'll go back to the way they were, without any of the tears or the hurt, living like they always had before?"

"If 'living' is even a term that can be applied to combat AIs," the Avatar said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "So what will it be, goddess, Technoshaman Seraphita? As I said before, there isn't much time left. I do hope you're able to make up your mind before this lovely little playground gets swallowed up by all that karma."

He held out a white-gloved hand. The crest of the Church on the back of that glove glowed with a dull light. Sera hesitated. Several times she extended her own hand toward him, then drew it back; she staggered and bit into her lip again. Finally, though, she fixed her gaze on the white-clad man and began to make her way to him with unsteady steps.

The Avatar waited with a thin smile on his face. Sera lurched toward him, stumbling back and forth, reaching out with trembling fingers.

That was when Serph and his companions reached the top of the tower.

"Sera!"

Cielo's loud shout made Sera pull her hand back abruptly.

"Sera, we're here to save you! Get away from that Church scum. We're about to tear him a new one!"

"Back away from the girl and stand down, Avatar-- that is what you call yourself, yes?" Serph pushed his way out from behind Cielo, who stood with bared teeth, looking ready to pounce any second. "She's a member of the Embryon, abducted unlawfully by Mick the Slug. I demand that the Church return her to us. Where *is* Mick?"

"You'll find that the filthy pig has melted," the Avatar replied with a look of disgust, pointing to the black, tarry puddle in the corner. Gale raised an eyebrow, and Cielo's already pale face blanched even further as he took several steps backwards. Argilla looked away, fighting the urge to vomit.

"I honestly didn't expect you to make it this far. Evidently I underestimated you. Good job not getting swallowed up by that mass of karma-- though I suppose it may still be a matter of time..."

"Stop stalling and answer us!" Heat snarled, stomping forward. The Atma brand on his arm was already burning blood-red. "Are you going to give us the girl or not? I don't like you, Avatar; I never have-- you or Angel."

"Sera, come over here," Argilla said, beckoning. Sera had gone still, paralyzed with fear and confusion, both hands over her mouth. "It's all right. We're here, now. We're not letting anyone take you away, Sera-- we're going to keep you safe. You don't want that man anywhere near you."

"It's no use, Argilla," Gale said. His voice was even and steady, but there was a charge of suppressed anger under the surface, fueling the current of Vayu's power. "Sir, the Avatar has already decided against relinquishing Sera; it is clear from his facial expression, words and body language. He also has no intention of negotiating. While this being's abilities present an

unknown variable, I believe that using our Atma to battle him and take the girl by force is our only recourse."

"So it would seem." Serph brought his fingers to his cheek. Heat stood next to him, and the symbol of Varuna began to throb sharply in response to Agni's growing rage. Vayu, Dyaus and Prithvi stirred as well. Memories flashed by, each adding to the anger that poured new power into each of their Atma: images of people they had lost in the struggle, their tribefolk and friends; the smiling and waving forms of Lupa and Jinana as they were lost forever behind a wall of rubble.

"Are you and your allies the ones who sent the black sludge, Avatar? Just what are you trying to accomplish by stealing Sera, or by filling Varin Omega's head with mad ideas and false identities?"

"'Black sludge'? Ha!" the Avatar spat, smiling coldly. "Is that what you still think it is? You're telling me you haven't figured out that this 'sludge' is the resentment of the people you've eaten given form? Haven't you felt it-- their suffering, their malice, their fear... the darkness from the moment of death, and their ferocious hunder and jealousy of the living?"

Serph winced as the Avatar glared back at him with sadistic glee in his eyes. Argilla cursed under her breath.

"You want us to cut off the source of that fetid monstrosity, don't you? It is an abomination of karma, a conglomeration of 'emotions' and 'self-awareness' that the Samsara system was unable to process. Indeed, I believe there was an omen to that effect. Was there not a strange Newborn among you, ushered into being with the vestiges of abilities or memories from a previous life intact?"

"Lupa," Heat muttered. Serph gritted his teeth, hard.

So the new Lupa really was the same as the old. The system had probably begun to go out of control all the way back before he appeared; and as a result, Lupa had been brought back into the world with all his memories taken away, leaving only his appearance and his prowess.

"What do you think the Church has taken from us?"

Lupa's words ran through the back of Serph's mind. This, then, was the answer to his question. Prior to the recent chaos, the Church had used Serph and the others as mere tools, a means of accumulating combat data. But after the Atma awakened the warriors' self-awareness and the new data of 'emotions' that came with it, the balance had toppled. The system had, until then, simply reabsorbed the statistical essence of the fallen in order to rebirth Newborns. Now, unable to process the new aspects of the Junkyard denizens' personalities, it had rapidly accumulated bugs that the system couldn't handle. The recollection of data had been stymied, and the Church's reformatting functions had been hampered. As a result, the system had begun to rebirth individuals-- such as Lupa-- that retained their original physical form and capabilities, but no memories. And then, of course, it had broken down entirely.

Lupa. You were right all along.

The Church had suppressed the denizens' memories, even their very consciousness, and blinded them to their own free will, all in order to collect combat data. That was all the Junkyard

was for. The endless war was all nothing more than a charade. And everyone had gone on, day after day, without realizing it, without being *allowed* to realize it.

Until *she* showed up. Until Sera, the black-haired girl, descended upon their world, bearing both blessing and curse.

"We have nothing more to discuss." Serph brandished his arms in front of them, and in a flash of blue light, they became Varuna's arms, their long blades snapping out into the open. "Return Sera to us. She's a member of the Embryon. The Church can't have her, Avatar-- and neither can you."

As he spoke, Agni's flames flared up beside him. Heat grinned in anticipation of the battle to come, a ball of crimson fire dancing in the palm of his hand. Argilla, Cielo and Gale called upon the powers of their Atma as well. Their hostility crackled in the air, there underneath the gray Junkyard sky.

"Oh, Serpahita, my dear goddess, will you listen to that?" The Avatar showed no sing of fear, even as the five High Atma stalked toward him. He simply folded his arms and leaned casually against the staircase, reaching down to cup the unmoving Sera's chin and lift her face. "Isn't it all just so touching? This display of bravery, all for you, when you had no idea things would come to this? -- Or no, perhaps this is what you've been wanting all along. All the hardships they had to endure in order to try to save you-- the world is on the very brink of destruction, and still they fight only for you. Are you satisfied now, you self-centered, arrogant, solipsistic goddess?"

Sera shook her head weakly. "Stop it..."

"Stop? It's not me you should be saying that to, Sera. You ought to be saying it to these five, right here."

"Come to us, Sera, over here. He's too dangerous," Argilla called out, now having fully transformed into Prithvi. "Don't listen to him. You protected us, now it's our turn to protect you. You're a dear friend to us, Sera-- you always have been, and always will be."

"That's right, Sera. Come on." Cielo had become Dyaus; his wings whirred anxiously as he rose up and hovered. "Besides, I'm way cooler than a stuck-up prick like him, aren't I, Sera? So c'mon, come with us. We're all here for you. There's nothing to be afraid of anymore."

"Sera, things are about to get dangerous. You need to get out of the way so you don't get caught in the crossfire," Varuna warned as he continued his slow approach. "We know the Avatar isn't going to hand you over; violence is our only option. Get behind some cover so that you don't get hurt."

"Silence these puppets, Seraphita," the Avatar commanded, his tone turning suddenly cold. "I've had enough of you playing with your dolls. You are the EGG's interface, Technoshaman Seraphita. Silence them-- I order you!"

Prithvi cried out with rage and swung one of her long arms at the Avatar in an attempt to grab hold of him. "What are you talking about, you--" she fell silent in mid-sentence as her arm abruptly stopped in midair. She thrashed about in confusion, but the limb wouldn't budge, as if it had been immovably fixed in place. Sera looked away, her eyes tightly shut.

"H-Hey! What the hell? Sera, are you the one--" Again Argilla's words were cut off.

With the exception of Sera and the Avatar, everyone present had simply frozen in place, bodies tilted forward to run, arms reaching out, mouths open to shout.

Heat growled like an animal caught in a trap. He tried to wriggle about, but no matter how he tensed the muscles of his shoulders and arms, they wouldn't so much as budge. Serph was similarly trapped; he was still fully aware, but held irrevocably. His body was frozen in an unnatural pose, with one foot lifted off of the floor; ordinarily he would have toppled forward, and the sensation was viscerally disorienting. He was locked into his pose as if he had been encased in amber.

"That's a good girl." The Avatar let out a gloating chuckle. "Looks like you're learning to behave a little. I do hope that obedience sticks after you go back. Don't forget: the continued existence of these people and their world hinges on your polite cooperation."

"*Promise* that you'll leave everyone alone," Sera said, her voice low, her head still turned away.

The Avatar spread his hands apart, tilted his head back, and let out a heavy sigh of exasperation. "You really do need to be more trusting. But very well-- once we're able to retrieve you, then as far as we're concerned, our business here is done. You're free to leave your precious dolls here in their toy chest."

Something caught his attention, and he turned his head quickly to peer up the short staircase that led to the platform above him. "Oh, it appears that our ride is finally here. A little late, don't you think, Angel? You had me a little worried there, for a minute; you know how your little princess has problems with listening."

"You are well aware of the technical difficulties on this end, Shin Minase." The voice emerged from thin air, distorted by static. In the space above the empty platform a circle of rainbow light seeped into being. Its circumference expanded, and then changed shape, finally taking on the form of a gateway of light shaped like one of the arched entrances of Sahasrara.

Wavering light filled the interior of the gateway, swirling in a dizzying array of colors and hues. In its center the indistinct form of a human face began to emerge. "Opening this gateway requires the combined processing power of seventeen supercomputers in addition to the EGG itself; even so, we estimate a maximum connection window of fewer than three minutes of your perceived time. Hurry, Shin Minase."

"Easy for you to say, seeing as you're just watching from the outside," the Avatar snapped. "But as you requested, I've got my hands on the girl, your precious Technoshaman Seraphita-- she who hears the Word of God as a living goddess-- your Hiranyagarbha, the golden germ slumbering within the divine egg." He flashed a mocking grin. "Honestly, you and the illustrious Madame sure do have a fondness for giving things pretentious names, don't you? Why you feel a mere interpersonal interface for a supercomputer needs such an overwrought tittle is beyond me."

"The EGG is no 'mere supercomputer'. Nor is the Technoshaman a mere interface. I thought you understood this." Angel's androgynous voice showed no hint of emotion.

The Avatar simply shrugged, then turned back to Sera and offered her a hand. "Come along now, goddess. Playtime's over. Cinderella's spell has worn off, and there's no glass slipper here, no Fairy Godmother to help you. Everything's going back to the way it was."

"Se...ra... Wait..." Argilla managed to croak out, frozen as she was with one arm extended. "We'll... protect... you..."

"I'm sorry," Sera muttered. She backed away, one faltering step at a time. Tears flooded from her big, wide-open eyes. "Argilla, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Serph. I'm sorry, Heat and Gale. I'm sorry, Cielo. I'm-- I'm so, so sorry!"

Serph tried with all his might to move his arms, but it felt as if they were locked in place by invisible shackles. He couldn't even speak, only growl in impotent frustration.

"I want to save you. I really, truly did, I swear. Please believe me."

"Se...ra..." Cielo squeaked out through Dyaus' beak.

Sera forced a smile to her face amidst her tears. "It was great, meeting you all, and I'm so happy you considered me a member of the Embryon. And I'm going to keep you all safe. The Junkyard and everyone in it are all going to go back to the way they were-- so please, don't worry. I won't forget. I'll never, ever forget you, or the time we spent together."

"All right, that's enough. Come along now, Seraphita," the Avatar said impatiently, grabbing her roughly by the arm. "We can only establish a connection with the logout circuits for a very short time, and I'd appreciate your not wasting it. You can say goodbye to your little dolls after you get back."

Sera recoiled from him, and for a moment tried to pull her arm free; but she soon ceased to struggle, simply going limp as she was dragged forcibly up the stairs. But she never took her eyes off of the Embryon, staring unblinkingly at one after the other as if to burn their images into her memory.

"Goodbye, everyone," she called as she neared the top of the stairs, straining to smile. "Everything's going to be all right. Soon enough, everything's going to be back to normal-- just wait and see. I sweat that I'll save you. I will."

The Avatar yanked her arm and she stumbled over the top step. Still looking back at her friends, her eyes full of tears she raised a hand to give a tiny wave. Then the Avatar began to drag her toward the gate.

A strained voice sounded in Serph's ear. "W-Wait... Sera..."

He couldn't move, but he knew who had spoke: Cielo. Somehow the boy had managed to speak despite the invisible bonds that held him. He had always been full of more than his fair share of obstinate determination.

Sera stopped.

"I... I'm a... bigger coward than... even I thought."

"Ci...elo?" Argilla managed to say. "What are you doing? Why..."

Serph caught movement out of the corner of his eye. It was Dyaus.

Somehow, the god of the sky was slowly but surely making his way forward, his graceful form moving through the air as though swimming, frustration plain on his pointed face. An unnatural

light rain in broken geometric patterns along his vibrant blue wings, looking like some manifestation of berserk fury, but Serph felt no sign of madness from the winged Atma. Cielo's creaking voice was much quieter than usual.

"Impossible." The Avatar had stopped short in amazement. For the moment he appeared to have forgotten about dragging Sera through the gate. "An AI that can ignore commands from the Technoshaman? It can't be."

"Back when... when Gale and I were escaping head...quarters..." Cielo continued, creeping forward as he spoke. "I... I understood... just what a strong girl you are." His voice was almost too soft to hear, but everyone present, including Sera on the platform above, could make out every word. Serph heard Sera gasp.

"You always had to... stand there and watch us fight, Sera." Cielo grimaced. "You kept saying over and over that you wanted to protect people, but you couldn't do anything, or no one would let you help, so even as people were hurting and dying, all you could do was give us your blood and worry yourself to the point of tears. That must have been so, so hard, Sera. You must've been so sad."

Dyaus managed to force his head up in order to fix his gaze on Sera as she stood immobile. "And when I was helpless to do anything but watch as that slime swallowed everyone up, I understood-- understood just how much you had to struggle to keep your feelings in check. And that's incredible to me, Sera. It really is."

"What are you doing, Shin Minase?" demanded the voice from the glowing rainbow gateway. "The connection window is down to one minute. Recover our Hiranyagarbha at once and log out." But still the Avatar stood and watched.

"I'm not like you, Sera," Dyaus said. "I'm weak. I'm just a big coward and I don't think I could handle ever having to feel those things again." By now he had managed to drag himself ahead of Serph, making his way ever closer to where the girl stood atop the stairs. "And so I'm not going to just stand here and watch as someone takes my friend away and erases her from my life!"

Dyaus lifted his head higher and still higher. His movements were sluggish, as if he were under the influence of some incredible gravitational force, but Dyaus-- Cielo-- refused to be held still.

"I came here to save you, Sera. And I'm not letting you tell me not to. I never want to feel that way ever again. Because it really sucks, y'know?"

The form of Dyaus grew blurry and indistinct, as if it were being washed away, revealing the face of the small-statured, blue-haired boy underneath. And that boy's ashen face showed a smile-- a bright smile, mustered to help keep his dear friend from being afraid.

"And so that's why I'm not letting you do this," he finished.

"Silence, puppet!" the Avatar screamed with rage. He held up his one of his white-gloved hands, the Church sigil on the back beginning to glow with an eerie light.

"Stop!" Sera cried out, the word almost a shriek. She pulled her arm free of the Avatar's grasp, then slammed it into his torso. The Avatar lost his balance, falling back against the edge of the gateway. Suddenly, Serph felt the invisible chains that bound him loosen. He could move.

He could jump.

"You little *witch*!" the Avatar snarled. He lunged and grabbed Sera by her hair; she yelped as he dragged her toward the gateway. In that moment, consumed by his rage, he failed to notice the shadow dropping toward him from above.

Serph had changed fully back into Varuna. "Sera, get down!" he shouted, and extended the blades from his arms, aiming for the Avatar's head. Sera thrashed about and once more pulled herself free of the Avatar's grip. Looking up in shock as he noticed his attacker at last, the Avatar raised the hand he'd been pointing at Dyaus and pointed it instead at Varuna.

A violent shockwave struck Serph, and he could feel the guise of Varuna being blasted away from his body-- but the attack didn't slow his momentum. He took his right arm, the last part of him that was still transformed, and thrust down at his enemy with all his strength.

The sound of metal striking metal split the air, and sparks flew; at the same instant, Serph felt a powerful impact against his body that sent him flying on a new trajectory. His blade broke. Varuna's arm faded and vanished, its power exhausted. The tip of the broken blade spun through the air.

As from a great distance, Serph heard a terrible scream. He struck the wall and slumped to the floor, stunned.

"What have you *done* to me, Asura?" Angel's voice was awash with rage and panic. The tip of Varuna's blade had veered wide, slicing diagonally through the open gateway from top to bottom. The tear in space turned crimson; beneath the light of its surface, it grew nauseatingly thicker, as if the world beyond was a mass of wriggling blood. Blue-white sparks sprayed forth.

Serph shook his head, bewildered, groping for some means to drag himself back to his feet.

"We are running out of time, Shin Minase!" Angel's voice from the rent-open gate had grown frantic. "The additional backflow of data just now rendered almost all of our collected supercomputers inoperable. The connection window will close in fifteen seconds; it will be impossible to log in again. Get the Technoshaman and log out at once, or else you will join the Asura in being absorbed by the malformation of karma and reduced to utter chaos."

"By your command," the Avatar said, and sprang after Sera as she ran toward Serph and Cielo. He caught her on the stairs and grabbed her from behind, wrapping his arms around her and struggling to drag her back to the gate.

"Wait, please!" Sera pleaded, fighting to break free of his grasp. "Please, you have to save these people and turn their world back to normal! You can do that, right? Can't you?"

"You know, I'm not really sure," the Avatar spat with cold indifference. "This little combat playground was originally designed as a sort of camouflage for the warmongering Colonel and the country he served. Now that the Colonel's dead, his country has collapsed, I'm not sure it really matters what happens to this place. Maybe it's for the best if it's simply deleted."

"No!" Sera's knees buckled, and she crumpled to the floor of the platform. The Avatar harshly yanked her back to her feet, attempting to shove her through the gateway.

Prithvi staggered forward. "Sera!" Her footsteps were unsteady, as if she moved through oil. Agni let out a deep growl from the diaphragm, doing his utmost to scrabble toward their foe.

"Se...ra..." Serph had managed to prop his upper body up, but that was all he could do; his legs were too weak to lift him. His vision grew hazy. He sensed that the karmic monstrosity was closing in.

Vayu swept toward them, but like Prithvi's, his movements were slowed. Surely the Avatar would escape.

Cielo had reverted to human form and collapsed. "Sera!" he wailed.

"Why must you all be so damn irritating?" The Avatar stopped briefly at the threshold of the gate, lifting up the Church's insignia. The double thorned crown pulsed with energy.

Instantly released from their state of immobilization, the members of the Embryon were sent flying by the blast. Serph once again slammed into the wall. His vision grew hazy and he groaned in pain.

A wet sound filled the air as the doorway to the stairwell burst open. A writhing black mass came oozing through it, surging across the rooftop. Even as it did, more of the black sludge swept over the low walls of the roof's perimeter, its slimy surface twisting into countless faces.

"This is farewell, dear puppets," the Avatar said with a laugh. "You're free to do as you wish, now. You can allow yourselves to be consumed by your own karma, or you can resist until the bitter end; either way, you don't have long, so make the best of your final moments."

All color drained from Sera's face. She opened her mouth, but all that came out was a shrill whistle as she stared at her companions, surrounded by the sludge on all sides, unable to move.

The Avatar vanished through the gateway, dragging her slowly after him. All the while she struggled, her black eyes fixed desperately on her friends. First the arm he held vanished, then her shoulder, her torso, her neck. Finally, her face began to slide through, until only her mouth and one eye remained in this world, and they let out a flash of light and a sound like a thunderclap.

"No!"

The earth trembled.

The gateway vanished without a trace as soon as Sera and the Avatar passed through it, concentric circles of gold radiating out from where it had been, rapidly spreading with incredible force across the entire Junkyard.

The echoing choir of suffering and lamentation was swallowed up by an abyss of silence. The twinkles of emerald light in the sky sparkled and then burst apart in an almost playful display of annihilation.

A different sort of purifying apocalypse came rushing in the far horizon. Golden flames frolicked across the landscape, burning everything they touched into oblivion. Where the flaming brightness struck the writhing sludge, it crumbled and melted into non-existence. But it was not the sludge alone that vanished, but the ruins, the buildings, even the Temple itself-- all were reduced to tiny particles as the light reached them, scattering through the void.

Serph was on one knee, still unable to stand, as the chaotic display flashed by him in bits and pieces. Visions whirled before his eyes. There were Muladhara, Svadhisthana, Anahata, Manipura, Vishuddha and Ajna, all buried under the muck, the glimmering light of purification wiping them clean of their filth, revealing them in their original states for an instant before they too began to fade away like a mirage.

And then there was Sahasrara; not even the Golden Lotus itself was spared this bright destruction. The pristine white tower and Temple complex, which had never before known impurity, were stripped clean of the malevolent ooze, only to be reduced to dust and blown away on a golden wind.

For a brief moment, the white tower was returned to its former luster; then it was absorbed in the soft, gold-tinged light. Amidst multiple layers of overlapping silhouettes, the twelve dangling arms of the Dissemination Machine flickered and faded.

Everything vanished, purified and returned to nothingness. What remained was an empty abyss filled with total darkness. And in that darkness, there shone a warm, golden halo, and nothing more.

Serph tried to shout, *Where is everyone?* He searched for his companions.

But he could not take their hands. Cielo ran towards him, only to melt away into the light, his last cry of *'buddy!'* echoing faintly. Argilla and Gale both reached out their hands, trying to grab Serph's, only to grow immaterial and recede into the glow. Heat was looking at him, mouth open as if shouting something, but he, too, was swallowed by the light and swiftly disappeared. Serph flailed about, calling out each of his companions' names. He ran to where they had vanished. The world spun, and his vision was swathed in light.

He felt like he was falling, falling with incredible momentum. But where to? He did not know. He could see nothing but golden light surrounding him on all sides. All that he knew was that he still existed, that the sludge and the Junkyard had vanished, and that he had been sent hurtling at a furious speed toward some unknown somewhere.

What had happened to his friends? And to Sera and the Avatar and Angel? Reeling doubt possessed his thoughts. He felt, distantly, as if there were a burning in his chest, though he couldn't even be sure that his body still existed. All he knew was that he was *here*, wherever that might be. --Maybe his being here meant that his friends had been scattered off in other directions, into other places of their own.

Sera. He recalled her final cry of despair. If what he was experiencing was somehow her doing, then he was sure it wouldn't bring harm to the Embryon-- but if it wasn't... He didn't want to consider the alternative.

Sera--

It may have been a long time that passed, or it may have been only a moment, before he became aware of something else.

A shape.

As his fall continued, he thought he glimpsed a tiny black silhouette passing by. A long, black tail. Big, triangular ears, long whiskers, and silver eyes. A cat.

It really did have his eyes. Of that, he had no doubt; it seemed entirely natural that this should be so.

And there it was, clearly now. The cat sat in the middle of the golden light, waving its tail slowly from side to side as it watched Serph fall.

No matter where he looked, he could see its graceful black form somewhere; its silver eyes.

The two gazed at one another, and they had a strange conversation-- one that, afterward, he could not recall.

Next Stage

How will my prayer reach you, who are unapproachable by every means?
-Cusanus, *The Vision of God*

Serph realized, all of a sudden, that he was confined within a transparent capsule of some sort.

He shifted, trying to get a look at his surroundings, but his limbs couldn't move. He hadn't experienced any break in consciousness-- not any that he was aware of, at any rate; after passing through that long tunnel of golden light, his vision had cleared up, and now here he was.

He tried to tug his arms again, but they still didn't move. There were metallic restraints, he discovered, fitted inside the capsule to hold his limbs in place. Others bound his torso. They didn't look like they'd be difficult to break, though, if he were to activate his Atma.

The front of the capsule was comprised entirely of a large, translucent window, and the rest of it was made of metal. When he turned his head, he could feel cables shift about-- cables that were connected to his body. He also realized with a start that the capsule and even his throat and lungs were filled with a thick, lukewarm liquid. He wasn't suffocating, however; evidently the fluid was harmless, and supplied him with the oxygen he needed. Indeed, he found that he had no need for active breathing. He struggled to adjust to the strange sensation.

Across from the capsule's transparent hatch was a wall covered in machinery. Serph did not recognize the place nor the equipment.

Where was he? Some type of research facility? If he wasn't in the Junkyard, then just where--

"We have visual on Asura-01."

A rush of footsteps sounded from outside his field of view. Then a dozen or so armed soldiers appeared, surrounding the capsule with guns at the ready. It was only then that Serph noticed the alarm had been going off for some time. The capsule and the liquid within it mutes the sounds from without; even so, the warning sirens blared so hard that he could feel it in his nerves.

"Asura-01 has adopted the form of a young man with silver hair and is looking at us. It appears to be conscious. Please advise. Do we have the order to attack?"

Enemies.

As soon as Serph sensed the threat, the transformation process began automatically. The Atma command-- *Om Mani Padme Hum*-- ran through his head, and warmth flared in the mark on his cheek. He heard a bestial growl emerge from his own throat.

Outside the capsule, the soldier who appeared to be in command started to back away. "Op... Open fire!"

A torrent of gunfire pounded Serph's capsule. The bullets hammered the transparent hatch like a flurry of hailstones, shattering it apart, and the tepid liquid gushed out onto the floor. Several shots hit Serph in the chest and abdomen, but he scarcely felt them. He screamed and spewed fluid from his lungs as he thrashed about, tearing his hands free of their shackles. His arms then manifested into the blue-white limbs of Varuna, their blades snapping out and slashing diagonally through what remained of the capsule.

The transformation spread swiftly across the rest of his body. Once Varuna had manifested his full form, he tore free of his remaining restraints like they were tissue paper. Instinctively, he leapt upward, moving faster than the panicked soldiers could track with their guns. Kicking off from the ceiling, he launched himself headfirst into the middle of the enemy formation.

"Asura-01 has freed itself from its restraints and escaped from its capsule! It's transformed from human form into s-some kind of monster. Wh-what the hell is thi--"

With one swipe of Varuna's blade, the soldier barking into his communications device was sliced from shoulder to sternum. He toppled to the floor in a fountain of blood. Varuna spun around, baring his fangs menacingly at the other soldiers pointing their guns at him; he saw them go white with fear.

"Steady, men!" snapped the group's commander, though all the blood had drained form his face. "It's only just awoken; concentrated fire can still take it down. Weapons free!"

Submachine gun fire erupted from all sides, but to Serph's heightened senses, his attackers might as well have been frozen in place. He could see even the trajectories that the bullets traced through the air. With a quick leap he dodged through a small gap in the barrage. The soldiers, realizing that their enemy had managed to get behind them, spun around, their faces masks of fear-- but by then, it was already too late. Blades danced, and a chilling, absolute-zero blast froze the area. The liquid that had spilled onto the floor solidified instantly. Arms went flying. The blood of the disemboweled froze in crimson fans even as it was gushing out.

Varuna cut a path through the room like a whirlwind. Dim lights glowed on the dust-caked floor and walls. Soon only the commander remained standing. His right hand had been cut off at the wrist, an icicle of blood dangling down from the nub. His purple lips were trembling. Serph grabbed him by the throat and hefted him up before slamming and pinning him against the wall. The man strained for breath as he flailed about.

"Where am I? Tell me!" Varuna hissed, voice low and menacing. "How did I get here? Who are you people and why did you attack me? Answer me!"

"Wh-What're you talking about? You're just a puppet who--"

"Answer me!"

Varuna increased the force behind his thick fingers and the commander's voice narrowed to a mere squeak. The few fallen soldiers who still managed to cling to life lay scattered around, choking and groaning for help. The commander's eyes darted about, looking desperately for any means of escape. Varuna's blades still dripped with blood; he blew out a white gust of frosty breath.

"I'll tell you one last time: answer me, or else--"

"This is the depository of Karma Society Research Facility One!" the soldier blurted in a panic. "But how the hell am I supposed to know how you got here? You're Asura-01, an abandoned prototype for a combat biomech. You want to know what you're doing here? Why don't you tell me, puppet? -- Ow, fuck, my arm, my arm--"

"Asura-01," Serph repeated, dumbstruck. *Asura*. He'd heard the word several times, back in the Junkyard-- from the mouths of Angel and the Avatar. "A biomech, you said? I'm--"

"Target acquired," said a new voice.

Serph's instincts warned him of danger, and he sprang backward, releasing the soldier from his grip. A moment later, a hail of bullets slammed into him-- but their impacts were so light it was as if being pelted with spitballs. Without thinking he brought a hand to his chest and brushed away the slugs that had only halfway penetrated his skin; they clattered to the floor like harmless ball bearings.

The commander left a trail of blood as he slid down the wall, ripped to shreds by friendly fire.

The new unit that had appeared from the hallway was made up of men in black combat suits, carrying shields and weapons and wearing helmets with visors down. "Gunfire has had no effect on the target," Serph heard one of them say. "The facility's security team has been almost completely wiped out. The target has assumed a unique combat form. Does the Society wish for us to eliminate or apprehend the target?"

Serph didn't want to find out if the man had received a response. Swinging both his blades, he charged toward the group of black-clad soldiers with a scream.

Several of the troops toward the front of the unit had set up an anti-material rifle-- a large-caliber weapon designed to destroy armored vehicles. The muzzle spat flame as the order to open fire was given, launching a twenty-millimeter armor-piercing round that could punch through the armor of a tank. Varuna jumped backward with split-second reflexes, swinging one of his blades downward as he did. He struck the projectile in midair and bisected it like a walnut shell, the two halves tumbling past him on either side.

"The first sortie has failed."

The follow-up attack was a fiery explosion; but this, too, Serph dodged easily, shifting backward to avoid the shockwave. He saw the flame and smoke moving as if in slow motion; he felt as though he were slipping through time faster than his opponents. It was an unsettling sensation. His movements and even his senses here in this unknown place were different than they had been in the Junkyard: there was unmistakably more power behind his arms and his legs, he was more agile and limber, and his perceptions were more finely tuned-- he was somehow

simply *better*. It was like he'd had limits set on his abilities before, and his body had somehow broken past them. Now, he felt like he was equipped to call upon his *true* capabilities.

He heard another voice, tinged with faint static. "Conventional weaponry appears ineffective. We need backup! Where is the advanced combat team?" The smoke began to clear, revealing the troop of soldiers staring uneasily toward him-- as if they hadn't expected their initial salvo to have any hope of stopping Serph.

These people know what I'm capable of-- partly, at least.

The soldier he'd interrogated had called him Asura-01, an abandoned prototype for a combat biomech. This would explain his heightened abilities, if indeed he had now come into the form he was always meant to have, a body capable of surpassing his old limits.

And if that was the case, did it not imply he was something these people had developed-- had created?

A sudden and ferocious anger welled up within him. Baring his teeth, Serph let out an animalistic roar. Deep within his body, now free of his bonds, his Atma slavered with gleeful anticipation.

The men with shields tried to back away as Varuna, now the very incarnation of battle itself, launched himself towards them. For the briefest moments, he saw the faces of the foremost through their visors, staring with shock; then those helmets turned opaque with frost, fell to the floor and shattered into pieces.

The soldiers' tight formation faltered. Varuna howled, his whirling arms extending as he performed his dance of death. The tips of his blades traced smooth, graceful arcs as they sent streams of blood and hunks of flesh flying. The soldiers were tossed about in a storm of ice and swords and snow from which they had no hope of escaping.

"Alert! Alert!" shrieked a voice from somewhere. "The target's combat capabilities are far beyond projections! We need the advanced combat team here, ASAP; normal humans can't hope to stop it!"

A man's body went sailing through the air in several pieces, and blood sprayed the area like water from a broken sprinkler.

The soldier who had been speaking tossed aside his comm link and stumbled back into the hallway, fleeing into a corner. His discarded helmet skittered along the floor. He looked up at Varuna with an expression of utter terror. His hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat and his cheeks drew back, quivering.

"M-Monster," he said. "Mon... Mon... Monster! Monster, monster, monster--"

He kept repeating the same word over and over, ceasing only when his head became a frozen block of ice, which was battered from his shoulders an instant later.

Soon there were no soldiers left moving in the hallway. Varuna thrashed with a rage he could not contain, roaring out a challenge as he scanned the dim corridor for his next opponent. He heard several footsteps making their way unhurriedly toward him from upstairs.

There was no point in waiting, Serph decided. If they were coming, then he would greet them with force. Varuna sped onward, a blue-and-white whirlwind, jumping from wall to ceiling to

floor in rapid succession, his movements wholly inhuman. He found an elevator, but it was shut down, so he tore off the door to the emergency stairwell, leaping up the staircase in a single bound, heading for the echoing footfalls he heard. Alighting on the landing above, he found himself in a dim hallway all but identical to the one below, and he dropped into a crouch sniffing at the air.

Mixed in with odor of smoke, blood, and mildew was the scent of earth, tinged with the smell of chilled metal. Evidently, he was still underground; the room where he'd aroken must have been built pretty far beneath the surface. He guessed there would be another floor or two to go before he reached topside.

Serph's improved combat instincts warned him of a threat. His body flowed smoothly into a battle-ready posture, and he re-extended his arm blades. An unbidden growl sounded from between his clenched teeth. He could feel something approaching-- something strangely familiar, yet somehow different in way he couldn't quantify.

The enemy. Yes, they were enemies, all right. He could feel their ardent hostility and thirst for battle, a gleeful impulse that made his Atma's heart and body alike prime themselves for combat. Varuna coiled into a deep crouch, then leapt upward with a mighty roar.

His blades tore right through the metal of the ceiling, ripping open a hole so quickly that he shot right through it, landing the hallway above. A group of enemies stood with their backs to him; they were trying to force open the door to the emergency stairwell that led to the floor below.

There were ten of them, and they all turned in unison, fixing ten pairs of eyes upon him. Varuna opened his mouth wide, unleashing a built-up burst of energy, the pale blue god of ice assaulting his foes with a breath of absolute zero.

A swath of red colored Varuna's vision as intense flames canceled out his frigid blast. Varuna snarled at the unexpected barrier that had sprung up, and he backed away with a series of hops. The soldiers stared back at him, expressionless.

Several of them had brand-like markings on their arms or shoulders, which had begun to glow.

Atma.

Behind the veil of battle-crazed Varuna's countenance, Serph gasped.

The soldiers moved to face off against him with unsettlingly casual precision. Each held up a hand or arm, revealing their glowing sigils; the marks came in various colors and shapes, but they were all ones that Serph had seen, at some point or another, in the Junkyard.

The blue light of the transformation enveloped his foes' bodies, each member of the ten-person team assuming an abominable form before his eyes: Turdak, Nue, Rakshara, Jörmungandr. He recognized them all as types of Lesser Atma found in the Junkyard, but this group exuded a calm, collected, overwhelming presence unlike anything Serph had felt from such beings before.

Where am I? Is this still the Junkyard, or am I somewhere else?

The Turdak screamed, spewing out its toxic breath. Serph quickly reasserted his control over Varuna, suppressing his Atma's urge to rush into battle, and fled the scene. A bolt of lightning from a Nue struck the spot where he'd stood a moment before, charring it black.

Just where the hell am I?

The enemy Atma scampered after him. He realized, in retrospect, that none of them had borne markings of a tribe; in the Junkyard, with the exception of Newborns who were fresh from the Temple, anyone who acted in concert with others would be certain to have tribal markings of some sort.

Swiftly he made his way up to the next floor, and then the next after that. He wanted to get to the surface; if he could make it above the ground, he could figure out where he was. The Temple spire rose up high into the ever-raining, ash-gray sky, visible from anywhere; if he *was* in the Junkyard he could use that to get his bearings.

--No. There may have been Atma here, but something was different. The last thing that Serph had seen before finding himself in the capsule was the top of the Temple tower... Sera reaching out her hand as tears streamed down her face... and then his companions disappearing, the world fading away into the void, and the expanding rush of golden light.

Then does this mean... Could this place actually be...?

The Church had said that beyond its uppermost gates was the paradise of Nirvana.

Serph slammed his way bodily through one last wall.

He was instantly hit by a wind so strong that it threatened to carry him off of his feet. He grabbed onto a rusty railing to hold himself up. His eyes were greeted by a near-blinding yellow sky above, and a desolate wasteland below.

There were a handful of dilapidated buildings nearby, surrounded by an expanse of sand as far as the eye could see. Far off in the distance he could make out more buildings in a similar state of ruin, all colored by the clinging yellow dust that billowed on the wind.

He turned to look back at the building he'd just exited. It loomed above him, little more than a big, square box casting a massive shadow.

Without thinking, he turned to gaze upward. The bright yellow sky hurt his eyes, and within it hung a round, black... something. Just a jet black circle, floating there in the sky, looking like some sort of bottomless pit.

The sun.

The word came to his mind from somewhere in the depths of his memories-- but no, the sun wasn't supposed to look like this. The sun that Sera had spoken of was something totally different, something bright and warm, a glowing star that painted the sky beautiful colors as it rose in the morning and set in the evening.

And the sky... the sky should be blue, something clear and pure and welcoming, that a person could just get lost in-- the blue sky of paradise... not this searing, toxic yellow expanse.

Where am I?

Serph could only stand there dumbstruck under that glaring sky, gazing up at the black sun.

Part I: The Junkyard

~ Fin ~

Afterword

First, I want to express my deepest sympathies for the people who lost their lives in the Great East Japan Earthquake that happened on March 11, 2011. My heart goes out to the people who right now, as I write these very words, are still trapped in disaster areas, are being hit by aftershocks, are grieving over the loss of friends and family members, and are suffering from the effects of radiation from the accident at the nuclear power plant.

As a writer, I have detailed numerous catastrophes in the pages of my works, including tales where the world as we knows it has been destroyed, and where human lives have been reduced to absolute ruin, and yet the real disaster and calamity that I have seen here with my own eyes is far more horrible than anything a mere writer such as myself could even imagine.

I live in the Kansai Region, which was unaffected by the earthquake itself, but for nearly ten days that have passed since, I have done little but watch the images continuing to pour in over the television, staring in a daze as that black tsunami swallows up people's livelihoods, or as black smoke billows from the nuclear power plant. I've simply been eating, sleeping on my futon, and sitting at my computer, thinking about what a hypocrite I am. I know that I can do is to donate whatever money I can (I am on medication for a chronic illness that prevents me from donating blood), but even so, whiling away my time in a safe place, watching these things on TV or on my computer, makes me feel terrible.

Here in the second volume of Avatar Tuner, I have written about a world that is destroyed. This includes a depiction of, for lack of a better way to put it, a mysterious 'black monster' that ravages the world and swallows people up; to see the tsunami ravage Tohoku, turning places where people had made their lives into a black mess of mud, oil, and wreckage, I cannot help but think of the words that I wrote.

In the pages of a novel, I can get rid of monsters. I can reach out a helping hand to save people who are about to die, and I can have the main characters escape just in the nick of time.

But when it comes to a disaster in the real world, I cannot do so much as lift a finger. I am reminded that I am, in the end, just one lone, powerless human being.

Today it has been exactly two weeks since the earthquake. Even now, the well-being of workers is threatened by nuclear generators that continue to emit dangerous radiation. An order has been given to stop the shipment of agricultural products because the water supply has been contaminated by radioactive materials. We cannot yet see any future for the areas destroyed by this disaster. Planned power outages are occurring regularly in Tokyo. Nearly half of the Japanese archipelago has been brought to a standstill. The news is rife with pointless announcements and insubstantial commentary, but tell us few of the things we actually want to know.

What can a simple writer such as myself do at a time like this? What should I do? Here, far removed from the disaster itself, I have never been more conflicted over my thoughts and actions.

I found something written on the Internet that helped shed some light on things for me.

In a review of Avatar Tuner, Volume One that was left on Amazon, the online book retailed, someone had written, "After the massive earthquake hit, I continued reading the book by candlelight. I told myself that I couldn't die until I finished reading the series."

The moment I read that, I was brought to tears. I had never received such an amazing compliment about anything I had written before. I can't imagine that reading a book with only the light of a candle during a blackout is very convenient, especially during such an uncertain time, and so for someone to say that they couldn't let themselves die until they finished the series despite all that truly moved me. As an author, it was beyond humbling to know that someone out there would find the drive to go on living in order to read a story I had written.

Right now, all I can do is write novels, and nothing more; but I believe that by doing that I can fill people with even just a little more zest for life, and allow for some modicum of escape from a reality that we may feel helpless to change at times, and so I want to keep on writing. I want to express my thanks to everyone who reads my work, and I pray that the people who have been affected by this disaster are able to go back living normal lives as soon as possible.

This marks the end of the Junkyard story arc for volumes one and two. By now, people have realized that the plot has begun to diverge somewhat from that of the games, especially in terms of characters' attitudes and the like, and I'm sure that many of you can probably tell that the story is going to change even further.

Volume three takes place before volumes one and two, covering the events in the real world upon which the series hinges in a 'prequel' arc. These events were covered in the games' cutscenes and were mentioned in charactter dialogue, but I think people will get a very different impression from this upcoming book than they may have from the games.

The atmosphere of the novels is going to change some, as well. Up until now, there has been a strong focus on battles and transformation, but from here on, the story covers the fundamental questions, such as the birth of the Junkyard, the origin of Serph and his friends, and just who Sera is, from a more SF perspective. This may be a jarring shift, given how character-driven the first two volumes were, but I hope that people enjoy reading some of the revelations about the story's secrets thus far.

As always, I want to thank my contact person, Ms. Takatsuka, and my editor, Mr. Shiozawa, for providing me with editing feedback on my manuscript even amidst the earthquake, and for continuing to send me a barrage of proof copies. There's still a long way for us to go, and I'm looking forward to working with you both further.

I also want to thank Hirokata Maeda, my cover illustrator. The piece for volume one, with Serph and Argilla, their hair and faces contrasting with the dark palette, was really awesome, and it looked beautiful. I'm really looking forward to seeing what he does for this volume.

Last, and most importantly, my biggest thanks goes to everyone out there who is enjoying this story. I can't wait to see you all again in volume three.

Yu Godai
March 25, 2011